

Ancient Egypt and the Bible

Influences (?) in the Judeo-Christian Tradition

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Dedicated to all the People of the Book

Special thanks to biblical scholar Craig Tigerman for guidance on Jewish and Christian details

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By Brian Alm

Preface

For years I have debated whether to do this. It seems a fool's errand. To those in Egyptology it's nothing new or surprising, and to everyone else it may inspire responses ranging from fascination or awe to horrified denial and charges of blasphemy, depending on the reader's flexibility in separating intellectual curiosity from accepted traditions and cherished certainties. Beliefs brought under strong light can be fragile; for those whose faith may depend on a literal acceptance of the received word — whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim ("The People of the Book," given in historical order) — much of this may be seen best from a careful distance.

So, is it worth doing? I believe so. I have presented bits and pieces of this in mini-courses and lectures in Egyptology for years — at first, with some hesitation, expecting scowls, shock, perhaps even outrage. Instead, in every instance (so far, at least), there has been only positive response, ranging from intent interest to fascination and gasps of astonishment. Instead of the predictable scowls, I've seen faces turn bright with discovery.

Those responses, on top of the pure fascination of the topic, have encouraged me to proceed, mindful also of the ancient Egyptians' own example of consideration, acceptance and assimilation of new and different ideas, and their rejection of a dogmatic canon that would render inquiry and discovery intolerable.

These examples from ancient Egypt that turn up in the religious traditions of the Levant range from mere speculation, interesting similarities and archetypes to more intriguing evidence of apparent influence, and even virtual certainties.

There shouldn't be any surprise in that. The geographic proximity of lands in the ancient Near East and Egypt encouraged trade and mingling among people, and consequently, of course, cultural assimilation. So the stories and myths, as well as religious ideas and even the deities themselves, were shared as this mobility developed in the second millennium B.C.

By no means is this an exhaustive study — a career could be made of such research. Some extraordinary work has been done, by Egyptologists like Eric Hornung (*Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt, The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife, The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West*) and Christiane Desroches Noblecourt (*Gifts from the Pharaohs: How Egyptian Civilization Shaped the Modern World*), biblical scholars like Richard E. Friedman (*Who Wrote the Bible?, The Exodus*) and Israel Finkelstein and Neil A. Silberman, co-authors of *The Bible Unearthed*, and other eminent authorities. These are monumental works, and it is difficult to do these books justice without virtually quoting whole chapters entirely, which is out of the question. Suffice it to say that whether or not one agrees with their conclusions, these books cannot be ignored.

I won't pretend that this is a definitive or complete com-

pendium by any means, but I do contend that the examples presented here provide more than adequate evidence of influence upon these later religious traditions to make the exercise both interesting and valuable. Should the findings cause discomfort, I would direct readers to *What Do We Make of All This?* on p. 28.

And finally, I am reminded that the author of the first concordance to the Bible, a church musician named John Marbeck, was condemned to die at the stake for his heresy, in 1544, but was spared by a bishop who liked his music. His scholarship, however, was destroyed (Kohlenberger, Preface). I am encouraged to think that the reception by readers today may be more moderate.

But let's begin with the stories.

Please note that these ancient Egyptian stories and ideas are not all verbatim translations of the original Egyptian texts, but condensed and couched in language that faithfully expresses their thought and intent. The biblical references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Oxford University Press, 1989. Dates follow Ian Shaw's Oxford Chronology.

In the Beginning...

In the beginning, the Earth was without form. There was only the primordial ocean, which completely filled the universe. Its waters were motionless and silent; before Creation, there was nothing, there was only chaos and darkness. And out of this water rose the first dry land; the Earth took form, and there was light.

The Creation story in Genesis? Genesis 1:1-9: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light ... and God separated the light from the darkness ... And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters" ... So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. ... God called the dome Sky. ... And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together in one place, and let the dry land appear," ... God called the dry land Earth...*

No, this is an Egyptian story of Creation. According to Heliopolitan mythology (Heliopolis in Greek, the theological center called *Iunu* in Egyptian and *On* in the Bible) — in the beginning, there was only the primordial ocean, Nun, which completely filled the universe. The waters of Nun were motionless, silent and dark; it was the infinite nothingness before Creation.

The Egyptians knew that this water existed below because when they dug a well, water came up; and they knew that the sky was also water, because when it rained, water came down. That helped explain how the sun god Ra moved across the blue sky,

too — obviously the sun rode in a boat, and likewise on the return trip through the waters of the underworld each night.

Atum, “He Who Created Himself,” emerged from the primordial ocean and appeared on the first dry land — the “Primeval Mound” — and caused light to dawn on the world and disperse the darkness of the chaos that had existed before “the First Time.”

And then, just as it says in the Christian Bible (Ephesians 5:13): *everything exposed by the light becomes visible*.

The first earthly life to grow on this Primeval Mound was a lotus (water lily), which was an Egyptian symbol of rebirth because it folded up at night and unfolded in the morning. On this mound, the lotus opened and Ra emerged: light was born. And the Bennu bird (an ibis, which found its way into Greek myth as a phoenix) came at dawn and alighted on the Primeval Mound, which was enshrined in symbolism as the *benben* stone. The tip of an obelisk or pyramid (pyramidion) represents this first land, as well, and the residence of the god in the temples was raised a few steps, also as a model of the Primeval Mound.

These ideas followed observation. As the annual flood receded, plants sprang up on the mounds of earth that appeared — a fine metaphor for new life and renewal; therefore the Egyptians conceived of the beginning of the world as an emergence of land from the waters. The Primeval Mound was called *Tatenen*, “the emerging land.”

The spring floods led thinkers to ponder duality — a fundamental concept in Egyptian culture. The flood event showed that while water was life-giving, it could also be chaotic and had to be brought under control. So a thing could be good or bad, both of which were aspects of it. There is no light without darkness first. There is no ongoing life without death first.

The paramount principle of Egyptian culture was order (*ma’at*), a concept embracing truth, justice and order in Egypt as a necessity of establishing and maintaining order in the universe. Order is subject to the delicate balance of duality. The first and most obvious metaphor for that idea was very close at hand: the desert just beyond the fertile land, with almost no transition zone between them — a clear matter of either-or. A cobra on a king’s crown meant both deadly potential and protection. The same water that sustains you can drown you. Dualities were complementary, and had to be kept in equilibrium.

So it is conceivable that in the struggle between Good and Evil, or Truth and Falsehood, order may be threatened. The good depends on ethical behavior, and it is at risk of being overcome by evil, injustice or falsehood. This is ethical dualism: a struggle between a good principle and an evil principle, which became the basis of Zoroastrianism in the sixth century B.C. and found its way into Judaism and then Christianity, evident in the struggle of God and Satan. Zoroastrianism was of Persian origin and the Hebrews encountered it in Babylon during their captivity there. That is a long way from Egypt, but wait: much later on we will see how such ideas might have gotten juxtaposed.

And God said...

God said, let there be land, and there was land; God said, let there be light, and there was light. God spoke, and it was so. With his authoritative utterance, God created the world, the seas and the dry land, the sky and the order of the universe.

Was this the creator god of Genesis 1? *God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light ... And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters” ... And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together in one place, and let the dry land appear.”*

No, it was Ptah, the creator god of Memphis (*Men-nefer, Hut-Ka-Ptah*), and in Hermopolis (*Khemennu*) it was Thoth (*Dje-huty*). The god spoke, and it was so. It was this divine **authoritative utterance** (**Hu**) that broke the silence of chaos and created the world. The Creation story of Heliopolis (*Iunu*) was even earlier: *And the god Atum called the air Shu, and he called the Earth Geb, and he called the sky Nut.*

This also resonates with the Gospel of St. John in the New Testament, of course, John 1:1-3: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him.* It seems unlikely that John got any of this directly from Egyptian sources, but the idea of “the Word” as the agent of Creation does sound familiar. It is more likely that this kind of thought and expression was simply part of the Mediterranean mentality. But then again, the New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greeks did occupy Egypt for 300 years. So perhaps the notion of the Word was widely shared.

It must be noted too that the apostle Mark was reported to have gone to Egypt in the first century (sometime from 50 to 64 A.D.) to preach, and became the first patriarch of the Coptic Christian Church, so it is certainly conceivable that Mark, too, may have picked up some Egyptian ideas.

Now back to Memphis. In Memphite theology, Ptah had two key aspects: **Sia** (**mind**) and **Hu** (**tongue**).

The priests in Memphis held that Ptah, the god of craftsmen, envisioned Creation in his mind and then created it by speaking — giving all things names. Thus Creation was a matter of realizing pre-existing potential.

Sia was **divine intelligence**, wisdom and perception: the potential for being, not yet realized. **Hu** was the **authoritative utterance**, the power to command — to turn potential into reality — and above all, the power to create order out of chaos. Ptah had the power to command and make it so.

Put divine intelligence and authoritative utterance together and you have Creation.

It applied to the earthly king, as well. The king, son of Ra and descendent of Horus, “was believed to possess *hu* and *sia*, divine utterance and divine knowledge” (Shaw, p. 19). Roman Catholic doctrine has its counterpart in the term *ex cathedra*; when a Pope speaks *ex cathedra* (“from the throne”), he is speaking infallibly and his words are supposed to be accepted by all Catholics. The Egyptians would add *ma’a kheru*, “true of voice,” to emphasize the perfection of the utterance.

Ptah also created the ethical order of things; he was the god of truth — “true of voice.” In the Bible, remember that Aaron also was “true of voice” — he was able to get things done with the power of the spoken word. Moses put him in charge because he could speak well. If they were going to create a nation, they needed someone who could use oratory to turn the idea into reality — the word as creative force, the agent of order.

In Hermopolis, there were eight deities, four god-principles — Nun, Huh, Kuk and Amun — and their female consorts, who were simply their feminine doubles: **Nun** the primordial water — the infinite void, dark and formless (as in Heliopolis); **Huh** 2

(unendingness); **Kuk** (the absence of light); and **Amun** (that which is unseen, or air — the wind that stirs the waters from their immobility). These four principles lay dormant in the universe, waiting for an active force to stir darkness, unendingness, silence and chaos into order. Amun, the divine wind, was that force, the prime mover of Creation.

But also in Hermopolis, there was a version of the Creation story that matched the Memphite story: an egg was laid by an ibis bird, who was actually the god Thoth. Thoth broke the silence of chaos with his divine Authoritative Utterance, which created the universe, just as in Memphis with the voice of Ptah.

Yet a third version of Creation in Hermopolitan myth told how a great celestial goose laid an egg on the Primeval Mound, inside of which was Ra, the Bird of Light who would create the world. Of course, the concept of Light as the image of the divine was hardly exclusive to the Egyptians. John 1:3-4, 9: *What was coming into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.... The true light ... was coming into the world.*

Also in Egypt, a common term for the land of the blessed dead was Lightland.

So in different places, different theological systems presented gods said to be the creator of the world, the first being, the chief of all the other gods, etc. But common to all is that they all stand for order and command over natural forces; light, water, earth and air are brought under the command of the Word: this divine Authoritative Utterance that broke the silence of chaos and created order.

Again, let's look at Genesis 1: *God said, "Let there be light and there was light,"* and John 1:1: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* Also John 5:25: *The dead will hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear it will live.*

In fact, the "word of God" as agent of Creation and indication of absolute authority appears throughout the Bible; Isaiah 40:3-5, for example: *Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God ... Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.*

In Egyptian thought, because the two absolutes of the universe before "The First Time" were darkness and silence, the two absolute needs of Creation were light and sound. The light of the sun, the giver of life, was Ra (and syncretizations of Ra: Ra-Atum, Amun-Ra, Ra-Horakhty); and it was sound that "broke the silence" — the world emerged from the silence and the darkness.

The name of Atum, one of these creator gods, means "the beginning" or "the source," and, perplexingly, it also means "the end." The sun god Ra, naturally enough, is associated with light. These two deities, syncretized as Atum-Ra, comprise the beginning and end of light — reminiscent of the Alpha and Omega of Christianity, "the beginning and the end" (Rev. 1:8, 22:13).

A ring known by the Egyptian word *shen*, from *shenu*, "round," therefore unending, was a common symbol of eternity, and, when elongated into a cartouche, became a symbol of eternal protection — an agent of the eternal protection of the king's name, with neither beginning nor end.

Combining the ideas of endlessness and finality may seem an ironic and knotty matter, but it's something the ancient Egyptians contemplated, and so do we, the People of the Book. (See the discussion of eschatology on page 5.)

Poetic Echoes

Isaiah is perhaps second only to the Book of Psalms in its flowing, poetic style. But it goes a step further than musical resonance: it combines poetic and prosaic styles, resulting in a unique, engaging sound that is neither prose nor poetry exactly, but seems ideal to cast as-is into an oratorio — G. F. Händel's *Messiah*, for instance.

There is an Egyptian precedent for this unique and beautiful hybrid of poetic-prosaic expression. Ancient Egyptian literature "employs three styles — prose, poetry, and a style that stands midway between the two," explained Egyptologist Miriam Lichtheim, who identified this third style as the "orational."

"The hallmark of all prose is the linear forward movement of thought by means of variously structured sentences which, because they are deliberately varied, prevent the emergence of a regular sentence rhythm and of a predictable form. The intermediate style, on the other hand, is characterized by symmetrically structured sentences. It was employed exclusively in direct speech. Hence I call it 'symmetrically structured speech,' or, the 'orational style'" (Lichtheim, p. 11).

That describes Isaiah, as well as much of the books of Psalms, Proverbs and Job. But it originated in Egypt and was in regular use in the Old Kingdom (2686-2181, per Ian Shaw, Oxford).

Dominion over the Dragon

"What image could be easier to interpret than that of Saint George on horseback slaying the dragon?" asked the late Christiane Noblecourt in her exhaustive study, *Gifts from the Pharaohs: How Egyptian Civilization Shaped the Modern World* (p. 85) — and then proceeded to point out that in this ubiquitous "European" image we are really seeing the iconic dominion scenes from ancient Egypt, going all the way back to the Protodynastic Narmer and Battlefield palettes — Thutmose III bashing Asiatic and Nubian skulls on the Seventh Pylon at Karnak, Tutankhamun spearing fish (in KV62), Horus in human form attacking a hippopotamus (at Edfu) — all with "the power of Horus, the slayer of harmful beasts, and protector who destroys evil" (p. 86); throughout Egyptian history, a great host of pharaohs and gods displaying their dominion; i.e., imposing order on chaos — the fundamental Egyptian duality.

The preservation of order (*ma'at*) over chaos (*isfet*) was the primary responsibility of the king, and his subjects — everyone in Egyptian society, at all levels — were duty-bound to do their part to help; by upholding the social and civil order, they participated in ensuring the order of the universe. The wife who kept a tidy house and managed the family's finances, the soldier who obeyed an order without hesitation, the ferryman who steered a straight course and the miller who gave an honest measure of grain must have been duly awed to contemplate the comparative weight on the king's shoulders.

Chaos was close at hand; where the fertile black land stopped the desolate red desert began, immediately; there was a clear and precise distinction between order and chaos. The imposition of dominion and stability was fundamental.

From the Middle Kingdom on, tomb scenes showing the tomb owner spearing fish, fowling or hunting are not there simply to

record enjoyable pastimes. In her article, “The Decoration of Elite Tombs: Connecting the Living and the Dead,” in *Ancient Egypt Transformed*, Janice Kamrin says the deceased “may perform as a delegated representative of the king (and perhaps by extension as Horus, son and defender of Osiris), keeping the ordered cosmos safe from the forces of chaos” (p. 28).

St. George apparently has a longer history than we might have imagined, rooted in deep and ancient meanings.

Formed from Clay and the Breath of Life

God created the heavens and the Earth, and separated the sky and the Earth. He formed man from clay, in his own image. Is this Genesis 2:7?: *...then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*. No, in the Egyptian version two gods would have been at work here, Khnum and Shu.

Khnum was said to have created men from clay and fashioned them on a potter’s wheel. Khnum, called “The Moulder,” was from the area of the First Cataract and Elephantine Island (present-day Aswan), which was also thought to be the source of the Nile — erroneously, of course, but the association of the life-giving river and the formation of humankind was powerful medicine.

Even more important, at the same time, Khnum also created a spiritual double and life-force called the *Ka* — one of the nine aspects of a person’s being — and this *Ka* then accompanied the person through life and was resurrected with him/her at death. It was the *Ka* that had to be sustained by offerings of food, drink and prayer in the afterlife.

There is nothing in the Judeo-Christian religions that replicates the *Ka*, but it may be useful to note that in Egyptian thought, statues also had a *Ka*, and therefore the statues possessed a spiritual life and should be revered. Jews and Christians may consider worshipping a statue idolatry, but even so, they would abhor taking an axe to a religious statue or icon; and as for Muslims, who entirely forbid making an image of God, it would be unthinkable to desecrate the name of the Prophet Mohammed. So perhaps some of the spirit of the ancient Egyptian thinking on this matter managed its way into the Levantine traditions.

Shu, the god of dry air in the Heliopolitan pantheon (the Ennead), and his sister-wife Tefnut, the goddess of moisture — the first-born of the creator god Atum — together engendered the Earth (Geb) and the sky (Nut). In Hermopolitan theology Shu had a counterpart in the god Amun, “that which is unseen” (air).

In that version of the Creation, as we recall, an active force was needed to stir the dormant, pre-existing potential for Creation into being and establish order to replace Nothingness. Amun, this prime mover, was the divine wind that stirred the waters and prevailed over darkness and endlessness, resulting in Creation.

(Note that this Amun precedes the Amun of Thebes, an anthropomorphized god who would become syncretized eventually with the sun god Ra, as Amun-Ra.)

I bring this up again because the significant commonality in all this is the importance of air as prime mover.

The *shut* fan (pronounced “shoot”) is another meaningful

image in this context. We see the *shut* fan or sunshade often in the art but may dismiss it simply as a fan for a servant to wave over his master, or as a processional standard. But if so, we would miss the point: because a fan’s purpose is to stir the air, it’s a symbol of breathing, therefore also a symbol of life.

Wings (*djeneh*) in Egyptian art and architecture are a symbol of protection, healing and vitality. Isis revived the dead Osiris with her wings and she appears on sarcophagi wrapping her wings around the deceased. Judeo-Christian theology also might see meaning in such an image as the “breath of God.” Both the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma* for “breath” also mean “wind” and “spirit.” And Richard Wilkinson cites the Hebrew phrase “the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings” from Malachi (p. 101).

Ankh (life, living) was also a word for a bouquet of flowers; the aromatic lotus (water lily) conveyed the breath of life and pleased the gods. In their tomb scenes people are frequently shown presenting a lotus to the deities. In return, the deity may extend an *ankh* to the deceased, to present him/her with the gift of life, which was received through the nose, as air. When you see a statue whose nose and mouth have been destroyed, even though the rest of the statue is not marred, chances are that someone sought to prevent it from breathing. Statues, we recall, had a *Ka*, and therefore were living, spiritual beings. Chiseling off the nose deprived the statue of air, therefore also the breath of life.

On the south wall of the antechamber in the tomb of Unas, Utterance 269 of the Pyramid Texts says: “The incense is placed on the fire ... your smell comes to Unas, O incense!” Incense was an important addition to temple rituals; it still is.

The word *mes*, incidentally, means “birth” or “born of,” “fashioned by,” but it is also the word for “bouquet” (Dodson/Ikram 2008, p. 121). *Senetjer* means both “incense” and “to make divine” (Robins 2001, p. 7). Concepts of air and olfaction just keep multiplying.

When Hatshepsut wanted to establish her claim to kingship, she explained that Amun had come to her mother, Ahmose, assuming the form of her father, Thutmose I, and captivated her with his divine fragrance. Amun told the queen that as a result of this divine visitation, she would bear him a daughter, to be named Khenem-et-Amun Hatshepsut, “She Whom Amun Embraces, Foremost of Noble Women.” (We will cover that matter in greater detail later on.)

The Great Hymn to Osiris, written on the stela of Amenmose, tells how Isis “made a shade with her plumage, created breath with her wings... raised the weary one’s inertness, received the seed, bore the heir [Horus].” Note the wordplay with “shade” (*shut*) and “plumes” (*shuty*), and also a reference to the movement of air: the *shut* fan moved air, which is the breath of life, and the god Shu was the god of air, the firstborn of the creator god Atum in the Ennead.

But there’s more. Not only did Isis create the breath of life for her dead husband-brother Osiris, she also restored his ability to beget the child Horus by making him a new phallus from clay and magically giving it life. His evil brother had chopped him up into fourteen pieces and tossed the fourteenth piece (unfortunately for the matter of succession, a critical one) to the fish. Isis was able to get him put back together but lacked the necessary appendage, hence the need for remedial action on her part.

God became enraged against humans for disrespecting him and carrying on as they wished; in their wonton wickedness they were contemptuous of right order. So he took out his wrath on them and vowed to destroy humankind, but then, in his goodness, he took pity on them and could not destroy them. ... And a mound of earth arose from the waters, and on this mound a bird alighted.

The Noah story? Genesis 6:17: *"I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die..."* Genesis 8:3-5: *The waters gradually receded from the earth ... the ark came to rest on the mountain of Ararat ... the top of the mountain appeared ...* Genesis 8:11: *... and the dove came back to [Noah] in the evening and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf.*

No, this is actually a conflation of two Egyptian myths, the Destruction of Humankind and the Heliopolitan Creation story, in which we recall that a hill — the Primeval Mound, *Tatenen* — rose from the waters, and the Bennu bird came and perched on it; or, in Hermopolitan myth, the ibis bird (or a great celestial goose, "The Great Cackler,") squawked and broke the silence. In any case, Creation resulted.

The Noah-like story is from the Heliopolitan myth in which Ra becomes enraged against the people for disrespecting him and carrying on as they wished, and so he takes out his wrath on them by sending the goddess Hathor (in her alter ego as the ferocious feline Sekhmet) to massacre them; but then he takes pity on them and puts an end to the bloodshed.

Hathor as the lioness Sekhmet presents one of the many dualities encountered throughout the Egyptian culture: Hathor is the goddess of love, kindness, music, and other pleasant things; Sekhmet is a beast who feasts on human blood. But then later, Sekhmet would become the sweet, sleek little black cat Bastet, benign and domesticated. In the syncretism of Hathor, Sekhmet and Bastet, viciousness is transformed into goodness through the will and intervention of Ra.

In the Egyptian story, it was the Primeval Mound, not Mount Ararat; it was a Bennu bird, or the god Thoth, not a dove; and it was Ra, not Yahweh, but the Egyptians had the story probably 2,500 years before Ezra compiled and redacted the texts that formed the Torah. (The monumental significance of Ezra's work is covered in "When Was the Bible Written?" p. 25ff.)

The Hebrews who wrote about the Noah flood had spent 400 years in Egypt, during which time they must have heard about the pre-existing ocean of Nun, the Bennu bird and the wrath of God in response to disobedient humankind, and some of them worked on the Nile to control the flood for the good of the crops, so it must have been an evocative metaphor for them when it came time to write a story of their own. There is scientific evidence for the Great Flood that Genesis tells about, but even without a flood, they still had this Egyptian concept of chaos, order, and salvation through divine intervention, and that was really the message anyway.

The destruction of wicked humanity theme appears also in Jonah 3:1-5, 10, in which the people of Nineveh repent and God changes his mind about "the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them."

Speaking of calamitous endings, as the Coffin Texts wind down, "the Lord of All speaks his concluding monologue (Spell 1130) ... foretelling the end of this creation after 'millions of years'; only he and Osiris will survive the end of time" (Hornung, *Books of the Afterlife*, p. 12). This sounds a lot like the Christian theology of last things (eschatology), which deals with the Last Judgment and the cataclysmic dissolution.

"The eschatology of Egypt is most truly represented by the cycles of destruction and renewal expounded in the New Kingdom Underworld books" (Pinch, p. 89). "In Coffin Texts Spell 1130, after the creator has described the gifts he has given to humanity, he goes on to say that after millions of years he will become one with Osiris. When that happens, there will no longer be a division between life and death, and everything on earth will go through a period of catastrophic change."

And in *Book of the Dead* Spell 175, "Atum declares that after millions of years he will destroy everything that he has made and the land will return into the Deep, into the Flood, as it was before (creation)."

The Book of Revelation, in the Christian Bible, concerns itself with the apocalypse, the judgment of the dead and the selection of the blessed in a blaze of glory at the end of time, and does so in language that sounds very much like the Coffin Texts.

The Baby in the Basket

A woman had a baby, and, fearing that he would come to harm, she made a basket of reeds and hid him in the marshes along the Nile. An Egyptian princess found him and took him into the palace of the pharaoh, and raised him as her own, and he grew to become a powerful man and a great leader whose descendents were kings.

Is this Moses? — the child of the Levite woman who feared for his life and left him in a basket in the marshes, to be found by an Egyptian princess and raised as her own (Exodus 2:2-3)?

No, this is Isis' child, Horus, whom she was trying to protect from the wicked Seth, her brother and brother-in-law, by hiding the baby in the marshes in a basket of reeds. In another version of the story, it is Isis' sister Nephthys' (Egyptian: *Nebthet*) child, Anubis (Eg. *Anpu*), who was found and raised by Isis (Eg. *Iset*).

These stories were known in Egypt perhaps two millennia before the Moses story appeared in what was to become the Hebrew Bible. Horus became the god of Egypt from whom all pharaohs were descended; Moses — having been raised by royalty in the Egyptian court — became a leader in Egypt and later the leader of the Hebrews. "Moses" is an Egyptian name.

The Horus myth is one of the most elaborate and certainly one of the very most important myths in the Egyptian culture. And in it we hear echoes not only of the Moses story, but also the story of Jacob and Esau (treachery, division, and the ordination of hereditary succession), and, from the Christian Bible, the story of the baby Jesus (flight to Egypt under threat of death).

The Horus myth actually begins before Horus was born. His uncle Seth, jealous of his older brother, the god Osiris and bent on taking over supreme rule, tricks Osiris with a ruse that results in his death, and later on, chops him into fourteen pieces and

scatters the parts around Egypt. Isis, both wife and sister to Osiris, manages to put him back together again, with the help of Anubis (the first mummification), and magically revives him sufficiently to become pregnant with Horus.

The plot may strike a bell: a powerful man feared that a child had been born who would stand in his way, so he sought to kill this newborn boy. Exodus 1:15-16: *The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives ... "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him ..."*

Also Jesus was taken to Egypt to escape Herod's order that all boys under the age of two were to be killed. Therefore Jesus spent two years (or more) in Egypt, out of harm's way.

(Given the importance and proximity of Egypt, some have wondered if Jesus and his family spent a lot more time there than that, especially since no one knows where he was between ages twelve, when he astonished the elders in the temple in Jerusalem with his knowledge, and thirty or so, when his ministry began.)

But many centuries before those stories appeared, we have the story of the rascal Seth, who was determined to kill Horus so he would have no competition — no threat to his claim to the throne — now that Osiris was out of the way. Isis hid Horus and kept him out of Seth's grasp for a couple of years.

Ah, but that's not the end of the story.

The Great Quarrel and the Birthright

The departure of Osiris, now relocated to the Underworld as the god of Eternity, left the kingship at issue. Should the vulnerable little Horus succeed his father, as a direct bloodline heir to the throne, or should the kingship go to the older, mightier, and more immediately capable Seth?

The question was put before a court of the gods in a trial known as The Great Quarrel, or the Contendings of Horus and Seth. The trial was to decide between might and birthright. Ultimately Horus won and hereditary succession was established — ordained by the gods, in fact — and thus the succession of pharaohs was to be dynastic: a hereditary office.

Dynastic succession was crucially important. When the king died, order had to be restored without contest; his successor had to be installed in seventy days. Waiting for several candidates to vie for power was not an option, either for civil order or timing. The only way to ensure a smooth and timely transition was to ordain succession essentially as a sacrament.

In times of crisis or instability, like having no living heir to the throne, extremely weak pharaohs or political skullduggery and usurpation of power, dynasties could change, but the norm was father-to-son succession. It took a complete collapse of the civil order and central government, perhaps accompanied by invasion and conquest, to bring a kingdom to an end altogether.

Did the Roman Catholic Church apply this idea of hereditary rule in establishing the apostolic train of papal succession? There may be no connection, but nevertheless, the same thought supported royal and papal succession in Europe and pharaonic succession in Egypt, and the Egyptians established the foundations for it as divine law 3,000 years or so earlier.

This uncle Seth was a rough character, often seen as the principle of evil and injustice — a characterization that could, at times, vilify him in the Egyptian mind because they prized order,

justice and truth so highly, and one of those cornerstones of order was succession by birthright.

There was something special about Seth, which was an abomination to the Egyptians: he had red hair. We may recall that Esau, in the Bible, also had red hair, and was a rough character with a coarse, hairy body. Genesis 25:25: *The first [son] came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau.* The important thing to note is that Esau sold his birthright to his brother Jacob (for a bowl of stew); thus he violated the law of primogeniture, the hereditary right of the first-born, which in Egypt was a matter of order ordained by the gods.

Yet another matter of some interest in the Jacob-Esau story is that when Esau comes to his blind and dying father Isaac to receive his blessing, he finds that his brother Jacob has already been there, disguised to appear like Esau, and has received the blessing, thus depriving Esau of any inheritance.

The point relative to Egyptian lore here is that once a king was crowned, it couldn't be undone — even if the kingship was usurped or gained by deception. So far that much may help explain why Esau was stuck without anything even though he was the victim of treachery by his brother and mother.

But at that point the Hebrew story departs entirely from the Egyptian ethos, because Esau decides to kill his brother and Jacob flees for his life. The Egyptians would not understand that.

The salient point in all this is the supremacy of order. By murdering his brother, the first-born, Seth had dared to upset the ordained order of things. A myth was created to endorse the existing practice, which needed to be preserved against all possible threats. Hence, the coup-d'état as an engine of change was very rare in ancient Egypt.

It gets a little tangled, to be sure. The purpose of the Egyptian myth was to enshrine the birthright as the ordained means of succession, and to decry the pretender Seth as a principle of disorder. The Hebrews may have picked the parts of the story that best suited their own purposes, and in the process got it twisted a bit. But the use of red hair to indicate rough character would seem to be too obvious a borrowing to deny. And the sale of a birthright was simply unthinkable.

Serpents and Spells

Yet one more interesting thing in the Horus myth: when Isis hid him in the reeds, Seth formed himself into a snake and bit Horus. Thoth stepped in and saved the boy, with the help of a powerful spell of Ra, but all this business with snakes and spells does recall the torments Moses will heap on pharaoh, centuries later, in the Exodus story. (For those of my generation it's hard at this point not to picture Charlton Heston [Moses] contending with Yul Brynner [Ramesses II] and emphasizing his demands with pestilence and all sorts of strange, magical horrors in Cecil B. DeMille's film epic.)

The especially interesting part is the serpent, which can undo goodness and innocence, like the serpent in the Garden of Eden. But God, like Thoth in the Egyptian story, steps in to save his children from ultimate harm, but only after they have already been bitten — i.e., they have lost their innocence by yielding to temptation, against God's orders. Adam and Eve were bitten by desire and succumbed, whereas Horus did nothing to bring

this on himself, but in both cases the deity intervened, God asserted his dominion over order in the world, goodness trumped evil and chaos was averted.

Henceforth all the pharaohs, the spiritual descendents of Horus, would be protected by the cobra on their crowns. That's the distinctly Egyptian twist: duality — the dual nature and role of the snake, both deadly and protective; whereas in the Hebrew story, the serpent remains wicked.

But wait, perhaps there's a precedent in Egyptian lore for an unreformed snake, too. Indeed there is: Apep.

The Evil One Cast Out

The evil, wicked one was cast out, and descended to the darkness below Earth, where, in the form of a powerful serpent, he lurked in the watery depths intent on doing battle with God and swallowing him; this happened every night, but God was victorious over the serpent and returned in the light of day unharmed.

Is this Lucifer, the fallen angel who became God's constant adversary and the principal of Hell? No, it is Apep, the enemy of the sun god Ra. Some scholars think Apep was originally a form of the sun god himself and was banished from the company of the gods — thrown out of heaven, as it were — and wound up as an evil god who tried to destroy the order of the cosmos.

Apep was a huge serpent that lived in the waters of Nun and each night tried to stop the passage of the sun, Ra, as it traveled back through the night in its solar barque to be reborn at dawn.

The sky above and the earth below were all water — obviously so, since rain came down and well water came up, and the sun had to move through this water somehow. So, during the day the sun traveled across the sky in a boat called "The Boat of Millions of Years," then back to the east through the waters of the night to be resurrected in the morning and start the trip again the next day.

Why "millions of years"? "Millions" meant infinite — "I can't count any higher." The hieroglyph for one million, *heh*, is shown in the form of the god Heh, who in art is portrayed holding up the sky (his raised arms look like the glyph for *Ka*). And so, in the image of the solar barque of Ra, the "Boat of Millions of Years," we have a message of hope: an implied promise of permanence, even though the daily course of the sun is cyclical.

(Note too that in the 19th Dynasty Papyrus of Ani, the expression "a matter a million times true" is used frequently to punctuate the point; Lutherans may hear echoes of Martin Luther's Catechism in that phrase: "This is most certainly true.")

Something very interesting is going on here: a combination of two kinds of eternity — the **cyclical**, which explains the diurnal life of the sun, the annual life of the crops, and the recurring resurrection of the dead, and the **eternal continuity** that results when a cycle is repeated endlessly, like a wheel turning in circles but progressing as it goes.

The former, the cyclical, was called *neheh*, and the continuing eternity, or permanence, was called *djet*, as in the expression *di ankh mi Ra djet-ta*, "given life like Ra forever."

Apep was regarded as the principle of evil in constant struggle with the good, i.e., the right order of the world — a potential force that could bring about the total destruction of the universe.

Interestingly, an asteroid that has been identified as a possible threat to collision with Earth on Sunday, April 13, 2036, is named Apophis, which is the Greek form of Apep. The odds are only 1 in 250,000, however.

Triads and Trinities

Divine family triads were prominent in Egyptian mythology, e.g., in the New Kingdom the main triad was Amun, Mut and their son Khonsu. In Memphis it was Ptah, Sekhmet and Nefertem; in Hermopolis, Thoth, Seshat and Hor-nub (the "golden Horus"); in Dendera and Edfu, Horus and Hathor and their son Ihy.

These triads always had a father, mother and son. The institution of a holy family of three with a divine son goes back to Osiris, Isis and Horus — "the Horus-child, born of a miracle and heir to the ancestral theogamy" (Noblecourt, p. 267). All the pharaohs from the 5th Dynasty on regarded themselves as descendents of Horus. The miracle she refers to is, of course, Osiris' post-mortem impregnation of Isis.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus followed a very ancient precedent.

The Magic of the Name

"I am the creator of the Earth and all that is upon the Earth. I made the water and the sky, and when I open my eyes daylight appears, and when I shut them, night falls. At my command the mysterious waters ... burst forth. I created the hours and the days."

Is this God speaking to Abraham or Moses? No, this was the sun god Ra, speaking to Isis, who asked him his name and he answered at first with what he had done, but would not tell her his name. (In Exodus 3:13-14, Moses also asked God what his name was, and God said, "*I am who I am*.") Isis kept at it until Ra finally gave in and told her his secret name.

Why did Ra want to keep his name secret? Because to speak it to someone else would be to give that person power over him. Tell your secret and you are vulnerable. Does that sound familiar? It's reminiscent of the Samson and Delilah plot — Samson told Delilah the secret of his strength, i.e., his long hair, and she used it against him (Book of Judges, Chapter 16).

In Psalm 91:14 God says: "*I will protect those who know my name*," and in Judges 13:17-18, Manoah asked the angel, "*What is your name?*" but the angel answered, "*Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful*" — i.e., knowing the name had magical power in Canaan. In Egypt, in the Late Period, "Thoth became the authoritative god in the area of magic... The Egyptians were reluctant to speak his name" (Hornung, *Secret Lore*, p. 9).

Incidentally, the Judean Hebrews held (or adopted?) a belief that the name of God could not be spoken — it was blasphemy to presume to have power over God, and to speak his name was forbidden — so they used the letters YHWH, which were not pronounced. (Much later, the Germans spelled it JHWH, and since the W in German is pronounced like a V in English, when you put in vowels, it becomes "Jehovah.") The Egyptians likewise had circumlocutions for the mysterious name of god, "The All," "The Sole One," "He Who Becomes," "He Who Created

Himself,” “That Which is Unseen,” “The Hidden One.”

But knowing the name also bears the potential for a positive relationship: God says in Psalm 91, “*I will deliver those who cling to me; I will uphold them, because they know my name.*”

And what about the name changes in the Bible? “To signify his role as the patriarch of many people, God changed Abram’s name to Abraham — ‘for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations’ (Genesis 17:5). He also changed Abram’s wife Sarai’s name to Sarah to signify that her status had changed as well” (Finkelstein/Silberman, p. 28). Jacob was renamed Israel in Genesis 32:29 and 35:10. We may recall too that Jesus changed Simon’s name to Peter, “the Rock” — regarded by the Roman Catholic Church as the bishop of Rome and the first pope, from whom all other popes are spiritually descended (just as pharaohs were descended from Horus).

In each case the name change marks a promotion of role and status, and the promise of a host of descendants. (Ramesses II is exemplary in that regard because he was the father of at least 100 children, about evenly split between boys and girls.)

In Egypt, when a king was crowned he assumed four more names in addition to his birth name, one of which — the throne name — was the name he was called from then on. Ramesses II, for instance, was, in Egyptian, *Ramess* (or *Ramessu*) at birth (“born of Ra”), but at his coronation he became *Usermaatra*, *setep-en-Ra*. All the kings in the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom assumed Horus names, and throne names after the Old Kingdom, which changed their status from mortal men to semi-divine rulers whose primary duty on Earth, as the descendants of Horus, was to preserve the order of the universe.

Most important of all for the Egyptian was the use of the name after death. When the deceased appeared before the forty-two judges in the Court of Osiris, to recite the Negative Confession in order to be admitted to Eternity, he had to address each judge by name — this test was his magic key, and it had to be done precisely. Once past the Judgment and declared Justified, he would enter the tomb, upon which his name (*ren*) had to be clearly inscribed so his bird-like *Ba* could find its way home each night; only then could his being be complete, with all of its interdependent manifestations intact.

Incestuous Conception

Nephthys (*Nebthet*) was unable to have a child with her husband-brother Seth, so she got her older brother Osiris (*Usir*, *Wennefer*) drunk and thereby got him to beget her child, Anubis (Eg. *Anpu*). The Hebrew version of that is in Genesis 19:32-36: “*Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father*” ... *thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father.*

Dominions of Sun and Moon

The two lights in the sky, the sun and the moon, ruled over the day and over the night. Genesis 1:16?: *God made the two great lights — the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night* ... No, the sun was Ra and the moon was Thoth, and they took turns ruling over day and night. The diurnal

cycle was vitally important to the Egyptians: every morning when the sun came up, it was a confirmation that life not only could be resurrected, it would be.

Intercessory Deities and the Power of Prayer

The Egyptians had around 1,500 deities. Only some of them were supreme gods worshiped throughout Egypt, or held in particular favor by one of the major theological centers. The vast majority were local or regional gods and minor deities, and, especially, gods and goddesses of specifically defined interest — for example **Anuket**, goddess of the cataracts, who kept the Nile between its banks and controlled the flood; **Taureret**, goddess of childbirth and maternity; **Heket**, goddess of the grain before it germinated and goddess of midwives, who also assisted every morning in the rebirth of the sun; **Meskhenet**, the goddess who helped women in labor and stood beside them during childbirth; **Renenutet**, who presided over a baby’s suckling and gave him his name, also the goddess of harvest and the granary; **Min**, the god of male potency; **Bes**, god of the adornment of women — women often had his image carved on their hand-mirrors and perfume bottles — and a beloved companion in the household; and many more — a deity for everything.

Actually, these specialist gods might seem familiar to many Christians, especially Roman Catholics and Orthodox believers steeped in the tradition of patron saints who can intercede for them. Instead of a St. Christopher on the dashboard of his chariot, an Egyptian might have Min, who among other duties was a god of protection for travelers in the desert.

“An individual deity might separate into several aspects of the same being,” says Joyce Tyldesley. Horus, for instance, who appears as a baby, the solar god Horus the Elder, a progenitor of kings, a son who inherits his father’s throne (Horus the Younger, son of Isis), Horakhty (Horus of the Two Horizons), etc. “This concentration on specific aspects is, however, unique neither to Egypt nor to the ancient world and an easy parallel may be drawn with the Catholic Church’s recognition of many aspects of Mary” (p. 21).

Enlisting the aid of apotropaic gods — those whose main purpose is protective — and using an amulet or a spell to ward off evil were common practices for the ancient Egyptians; they would certainly see the reasoning in “The Exorcist” and “Dracula,” and recognize the apotropaic value in the crucifixes and crosses employed.

One particularly interesting protective goddess is **Serket**, recognizable by her scorpion headdress, also known as *Serket Hetyt*: “she who causes the throat to breathe” — she was regarded as the antidote for scorpion poison, which restricts breathing. She also was called The Divine Mother.

In league with Qebesenuet, she guarded the west side of the canopic shrine and the jar that held the intestines. In her funerary role, she was called “Mistress of the Beautiful House” (the embalming pavillion), and she was involved in the embalming ceremony. She served as Horus’ babysitter when the god was a tot; and as the goddess of conjugal union, she stood guard outside the boudoir to ensure that couples were not disturbed while they were making love. She had a very full plate.

It is clear that gods and goddesses were believed to be

active participants in the lives of human beings. “Immanuel, God with us” (from the Book of Isaiah) would make perfect sense to an ancient Egyptian. To the Egyptian mind, there was no mystery or problem in all this: the gods were living though unseen. We don’t see the sun at night, but it must be there because it always comes back in the morning; therefore it is logical to believe in the unseen: the fact that you can’t see it doesn’t make it false. The certainty of the sun was proof of the principle.

Despite the 1,500 deities and their variety, “By the end of the Old Kingdom at the latest, the Egyptians had developed their conception of a supreme being who is ‘king’ and ‘lord’ of all that is created, and is also the creator and sustainer of ‘everything that exists,’” writes Hornung, but with qualification: “In Egypt, however, the qualities of this supreme being do not attach to a particular deity, but may be attributed to any deity, even to relatively unimportant local gods” (*Conceptions*, p. 235).

The problem we have in trying to understand the ancient Egyptian mind and the apparent contradictions that were accepted is that we in our Western wisdom want to see clearly defined demarcations, linear progression, and logical development. That the Egyptians could manage without such a handicap may explain the durability of their religion. No one ever went to war over their religious beliefs.

“According to the principles of western logic it would be an impossible contradiction for the divine to appear to the believer as one and almost absolute, and then again as a bewildering multiplicity; we find it surprising that in Egyptian thought these two fundamentally different formulations are evidently not mutually exclusive but complementary” (Hornung, *Conceptions*, p. 237).

Among the common people, at the domestic level, things were apparently quite simple, but nonetheless devout. Worship, usually at altars or shrines in the main living room of the home, and prayer were important in the religious life of the people, who were not permitted inside the temple. Ptah was revered as “the god who hears prayers” and was invoked on “hearing-ear” stelae that provided a connection between the supplicant and the deity.

People also could offer their prayers and express their concerns at the Temple of the Hearing Ear, on the rear perimeter of the Karnak temple. These pious acts were rather like stopping by to pray at a side altar in a Catholic church and lighting a candle — a way for the common people to connect with the divine.

But it does not seem likely that they engaged in prolonged and profound theological wranglings any more than we might expect around the kitchen table today. They had the comfort of believing without challenge. In fact, the Egyptians had no word for “religion” — nor did the Hebrews, for the same reason. “Religion was not a separate, identifiable category of beliefs and activities,” says Friedman, speaking of the Hebrews. “It was an inseparable, pervasive part of life” (*Who Wrote the Bible?* p. 38). It was the same for the Egyptians.

They could also pray at the tombs of their loved ones, to ensure the continuing sustenance required by the *Ka* of the deceased. The wealthy could afford tomb chapels for this purpose, but a simple plea for prayers by passersby, jotted on the tomb, would suffice. The tomb was “the point of contact between the world of the living and the realm of the divinized dead — the liminal zone where the deceased, transfigured through ritual and sustained through offerings, would dwell and be venerated for eternity” (Janice Kamrin, in *Ancient Egypt Transformed*, p. 28).

That may not sound much different to people today who visit their loved ones’ graves and leave flowers on Memorial Day. But in ancient Egypt that sort of thing was institutionalized in the various festivals, particularly the Beautiful Festival of the Valley in the second month of Shemu, when people processed to the graves of their friends and relatives in Thebes, bringing spiritual sustenance for their loved ones and a picnic lunch for themselves.

Hathor and the Mysterium Tremendum

Hathor was a very ancient goddess of many pleasurable things — love, femininity, music, dance, fertility, female sexuality, motherhood. She was the creative female principle, the protector of women, and the goddess of light and fresh beginnings. She even assisted with conception, labor and childbirth. In her alter ego as *Amentet*, the “Mistress of the West,” she welcomed the dead into Eternity — presiding over their second birth, as it were.

She was also worshiped as the goddess of holy inebriation at the annual Festival of Drunkenness, celebrated in honor of her alter-ego role as Sekhmet. She was regarded as the daughter of Ra and also both mother and wife of Horus. (Contradictions like these did not bother the ancient Egyptians: all myths were true because they all provided a way of seeing, contradictions aside.)

One matter of particular interest with regard to Hathor was her musical contribution. The purpose of the temple priestesses, female dancers and musicians — all operating under the inspiration of Hathor — was to arouse the sexual energy of the gods. They did so with the use of the *sesheshet* (sistrum), a metallic rattle, and the *menat*, a beaded necklace that may have sounded something like rushing air. These instruments had a supreme purpose in that they reenergized the gods’ creative energy and ensured the continuity of the universe. And they were the only instruments used in the temples for religious ritual.

We may well assume that the mysterious, other-worldly sound of these instruments, joined with the incense and shafts of filtered light in the dim interiors, cast a spell inside the temple not unlike the *mysterium tremendum* of a Catholic Mass in a soaring Gothic cathedral, complete with incense, chant and bell.

Ritual infused with incense, music and poetry, and even the architecture itself, can be transcendent. The Egyptians knew that very well. They did, after all, build the largest religious structure ever constructed — Karnak temple.

It is not possible to stand in the long shadow of a colossus, such as that of Ramesses II at Luxor, and fail to feel the weight of its message. The ancient Egyptian temples have not lost their power to impress, and cast a spell.

Isis and Mary, the Queens of Heaven

Later Hathor became syncretized with Isis, who was also a goddess of love and other desirable things, and, like Hathor, very popular. Hathor and Isis can be difficult to tell apart, since they both may be pictured with cow horns and the Ra disk on their heads, and since they share so many characteristics and roles.

But Isis went a step beyond Hathor. Her cult eventually stretched as far as the British Isles and lasted until 525 A.D., when the Roman Emperor Justinian closed her temple at Philae Island, at the First Cataract; she was the last Egyptian deity to be worshiped in Egypt, and the last hieroglyphs ever written were written on her temple at Philae, in 394 A.D.

Isis, the wife and sister of Osiris and the mother of Horus, instituted marriage and helped people understand the value of order in their domestic lives — the principle of *ma'at* in marriage and household. She taught women how to grind corn and make cloth, and taught men how to cure disease. She invented mummification in order to put Osiris back together after he'd been hacked to pieces by his brother Seth. In funerary matters, she was the protector of the liver in the Imsety (human-headed) canopic jar, stationed on the south side of the shrine.

Most of all, she was “the mother *par excellence*” (Robins, p. 83). In art, Isis is often pictured standing next to a mummy, in mourning, or cradling her baby son Horus, or offering the milk of life to the king, as the supreme model of a loving woman and the quintessentially divine mother.

Since her cult lasted well into the Christian era, as many have noted, it seems unquestionable that the early Christians there identified Isis with Mary, the mother of Jesus. In these images of Isis and Horus it's hard not to see Mary at the cross, or cradling the body of her dead son in Michelangelo's *La Pietà*.

The larger issue is to what extent Isis may have served as a model for the central claim of Christianity, that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus, who was “conceived by the Holy Spirit” — a claim not shared by Judaism and Islam.

Blessed Are You Among Women

Hatshepsut took over as regent for her young stepson Thutmose III and ruled in that capacity for about six years, at which point she decided she liked being in charge, and had herself crowned king in 1473. She did, however, need to legitimize her kingship, so she said the god Amun had revealed to her via Thoth (or an oracle) that he had proclaimed her his daughter and ruler of Egypt.

She explained that the god — having taken the form of her father, Thutmose I — crept up on her mother while she was sleeping, arousing her with his divine fragrance. The queen was told that she would bear Amun a daughter and that she should name her *Khenemetamun Hatshepsut*, She Whom Amun Embraces, Foremost of Noble Women.

Not only that, but Hatshepsut says that when she was born, Amun cradled her in his arms and called her “daughter of my loins, Maatkara, you are the king who takes the throne of Horus.” Note that she says “king” and that she got her throne name (prenomen) Maatkara at *birth* — that's supposed to be only upon coronation. Then at her coronation she said: “I am king upon the order of my father from whom I came forth” — the father being Amun, that is — and on her obelisk at Karnak she testified: “I act under [Amun's] order. It is he who guides me.”

The usefulness of this justification based on theogamy, the mating of mortals and gods, was not lost on Amenhotep III three generations later, when he too wished to explain his divine ori-

gin, and told how his mother, Mutemwia, also was overcome by Amun, disguised this time as her husband Thutmose IV, and then sealed the matter with the annunciation: “Amenhotep, Ruler of Uaset, is the name of this child that I have placed in your womb. He shall be a potent king in this entire land.”

How could the self-aggrandizing Ramesses II, a century later, fail to seize upon such a boon? Indeed, he did not. Geraldine Pinch: “A stela from a chapel in the Ramesseum complex records that the god Ptah took the form of Banebdjedet [a ram god in Mendes (*Djedet*), the northern counterpart of Khnum at Elephantine] to sleep with a mortal woman. The son that resulted was the future pharaoh, Ramesses II” (Pinch, p. 115).

“Once the king was crowned, it followed that his mother had been visited by the god and that the king was the son of Amun-Ra,” says Gay Robins. “This meant that every king's mother had been on one occasion the earthly consort of the god” (p. 41). Well, there you have it: an Egyptian syllogism. But wait...

The annunciation and divine birth: mortal woman visited by god ... the Magnificat?

“There is not a visitor to [Hatshepsut's] temple at Deir el-Bahri who on encountering the scene [of her divine birth] does not exclaim, ‘But it's just like the announcement made to Mary by the angel Gabriel!’” (Nobelscourt, p. 235). But 1,500 years earlier, it was not Gabriel, it was Thoth; it was not Mary, it was Hatshepsut; and it was not the Holy Spirit, it was Amun.

Theogamy also informed the annual Opet Festival — the main festival of the year in the New Kingdom, in which the king was rejuvenated and his “divinity recharged as the living son of Amun-Ra,” says Toby Wilkinson. This was accomplished by “as inventive a piece of theology as the ancient Egyptians ever devised.” In the second month of *Akhet*, the image of Amun was carried from Karnak south about two kilometers to Luxor (*Ipet Resyt*, the “Southern Sanctuary”), where the god dallied for a month, reinvigorating both his divinity and the kingship by coupling symbolically with the pharaoh's mother, and then returned home to Karnak via the Nile.

“The key to the whole ceremony was the royal *Ka*, the divine essence that passed, unseen, into the mortal body of each successive monarch and made him godlike. [This] explained and reconciled the apparent contradiction that a king could be both mortal and divine” (T. Wilkinson, p. 251).

Holy Water

The myth of Isis and the Seven Scorpions appears on the Metternich Stela (a *cippus*, a gravestone-like slab of stone), now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, bearing an image of the child Horus (*Horpakhered*) protected by Bes and other apotropaic deities. Lucia Gahlin: “A number of spells are inscribed on the *cippus*, for use in a ritual in which the water became imbued with magical potency when it was poured over the *cippus*. The liquid could then be ritually drunk or applied” (Gahlin, p. 63).

Offering tables typically had a trough with a drain at the lower edge of the slab, for libation purposes; the *hes* vase or jar containing liquid (usually water) was used for libations and offerings, and to render the body ritually pure. (The verb

kebeh means “to purify” and the *hes* vase is often pictured with a wavy line coming down from the top, indicating its function as a purifying libation.)

Similarly, the breast glyph (*menedj*) meant nourishment, mother’s milk, abundance, and portrayed a situla, a breast-shaped container for water or milk offerings, dangled at arm’s length by Isis, reflecting her maternal role.

These scenes demonstrate the reciprocal relationship linking humankind and the divine: people honor their deities, who reciprocate with the gift of life — and most especially the continuation of life after death. More often, indeed, Isis grips an *ankh*, as do other deities: they have the gift of life to bestow on those who honor them.

We recall also the thrice-daily ritual washing of the priests in the sacred lake (*she-netjer*) to purify themselves for their duties, and that the dead looked forward to floating on a lake of flowers.

Incidentally, “water — and thus jars of water — could represent Osiris” (R. Wilkinson, p. 205), the god of the Underworld, who welcomed the Justified into eternal life. The Letter of St. Paul to Titus in the New Testament says: *He saved us ... according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth* (Titus 3:5); in the King James version, it’s “the washing of regeneration.”

In a land like Egypt, a fertile slash through the hostile desert, it is no stretch to see why water and life were so associated in both thought and symbol. In most Christian countries, water is more abundant, but the sacrament of baptism is no less revered.

The Good Shepherd

Osiris (Eg. *Usir*; “user” = “mighty”), the lord of the Underworld, was called “The Good Shepherd” along with a hundred other names — “Lord of the Living,” “The Good One,” “the Giver of Himself,” “the Food That Will Never Perish,” “the Mighty One,” “Lord of the Universe,” “Ruler of Eternity,” “King of the Gods,” “He who is triumphant over death and decay,” et al.

But then, the Jews and Christians have a variety of names for God, too — the Lord, Yahweh (YHWH), Jehovah, Adonai, Elohim, Heavenly Father, the Almighty, Abba, the Most High, Ancient of Days, the Alpha and Omega, Everlasting Father, the Holy One of Israel, Creator, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, The Way, The Truth and the Life, God of Abraham, Bread of Life, Lord of Hosts, Deus, Dios, Gott, Gud, Dieu, Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Lamb of God, the Son of Man, Immanuel, Messiah, Savior, and yes, the Good Shepherd — whereas the Muslims keep it simple: Allah.

The common people loved Osiris because he was like them: he was born (he did not create himself or hatch from a cosmic egg), he had lived like a mortal being, he had joys and sorrows just like we do, he was a family man — he had a wife and son — and he was the victim of horrible injustice: he was murdered through the treachery of his brother Seth. He died, just as ordinary mortals do — but he rose again! And most important, he could make others rise again too! — and not just the pharaohs, but all people (that is to say, Egyptians). He promised peace and eternal happiness for those worthy of being admitted into The West. The people could look forward to eternally happy lives in a world ruled by a just and good king — a father figure, strong and

caring (1 Corinthians 15:55: *O death, where is your sting?*).

Furthermore, he was a very accessible god, very human, a loving father, gentle, kindly and welcoming; the “Eternal Father, strong to save,” as the Navy Hymn goes. You could apply many Christian hymns to Osiris and the Egyptians would never know the difference.

There were shrines to Osiris, in particular one at Avaris, that included what was said to be a piece of his body, preserved as a holy relic. (Roman Catholics will get the significance of that.)

Osiris was a very ancient deity — the Osiris cult may have formed as far back as the pre-dynastic Archaic Period, before 3000 B.C., but it came on strong in the 2nd Dynasty (2890–2686). The Osirian myth, a pillar of Egyptian religious belief, wasn’t actually written down until almost 3,000 years later, but that didn’t matter — everybody knew the story.

The Osiris cult was originally associated with fertility; he was a god of agriculture and herding, the first farmer, the first shepherd. He is always shown with his arms crossed over his chest, a crook (*Heka*) in one hand, for herding and protecting sheep, and a flail (*Nekhekh*) in the other, for threshing grain. (The *heka* glyph is also the word for both “magic” and “ruler.”)

Egyptian mythology is full of deities of both genders who represented fertility and the power of creation. This is hardly surprising: beyond the narrow, fertile valley nourished by the Nile was the deadly desert. It is no stretch to imagine that dualities would play a significant role in the religions to come, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, regarding the choices to be made in the continuing conflict of good and evil.

As an ancient god of fertility, farming and herding, Osiris’ transition to god of the afterlife made sense: just as the spring brought new life back to the crops, just as the sun was resurrected each morning, the dead could have new life in the world beyond. A popular personal possession was a little planter called an “Osiris Bed” in which grain would be planted so people could watch it germinate, just as they expected to do one day as they continued life in The West.

When Osiris’ role evolved into god of the Underworld as well as the god of rebirth, the crook and flail became the symbols of his supreme power — the power of resurrection, rather like the Christian cross. Incidentally, the *ankh* sign (“life,” “living”) has been likened to a cross by people outside of Egyptology, but that is purely coincidental; it was more likely a sandal strap.

Judgment in the court of Osiris, as we will see next, provides a *practical* sense of how order is to be maintained on Earth: ethics, a code of behavior. The magic spells from the Pyramid and Coffin texts remained, but now in the New Kingdom *Book of the Dead* we have a religious document to bring forward the principles in the secular texts of the Middle Kingdom — the Wisdom Texts, the Instructions and autobiographies — and apply ethical considerations to the maintenance of order.

“Teachings such as these were developed throughout the Egyptian civilization, long before the texts of the Bible appeared. Biblical texts are known to date back to the latter times of the reigns of David and Solomon (tenth to eighth century B.C. at the earliest) and without doubt their inspiration comes from ancient Egypt” (Noblecourt, p. 217).

There was now a code of behavior — decency, honesty, fairness, justice, ethics, moderation, charity toward those who are not as fortunate, goodness, right living — by which ordin-

ary human beings could participate in the cosmic order by ensuring stability on Earth. (Coincidentally, St. Paul's "fruit of the Spirit" included "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" — Galatians 5:22-23.) Ethical principles, the basis of the forty-two petitions of the Negative Confession, are then judged at the Weighing of the Soul.

The Last Judgment

We shall all be judged before the throne of God before we can enter the kingdom of the world beyond. At the Last Judgment, we shall be called upon to account for our transgressions and wrongdoings. Who passes this judgment will enter an eternal life of happiness, but the souls of those who do not pass will be thrown to a beast to be devoured, and will no longer exist. But the Lord is a good shepherd, who lived among us on Earth as a mortal being, God incarnate, who died and rose again and now rules in the life beyond. Through him we too can rise again. He welcomes the pure of heart into his kingdom, where peace and eternal happiness await all worthy souls.

Is this referring to the New Testament? John 6:65: "*No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.*" Or John 14:6: "*I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" Or John 5:27-29: *[God] has given [his son] authority to execute judgment ... the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.*

No, ancient Egyptians would recognize this as the court of Judgment before Osiris, in a place called the Hall of Two Truths, or the Hall of Double Justice. The deceased comes before the attendant gods and the scales of justice, and his/her soul is weighed against a feather — the symbol of *ma'at* (order, truth, justice), or an ostrich feather representing the goddess Ma'at, the daughter of Ra. If the soul (heart) was weighted down by wrongdoing, it was tossed to the beast Ammit, the Devouress of the Damned, crouching and drooling nearby.

For Egyptian salvation, personal responsibility was paramount. If you had not followed the path of goodness during your life, you were vulnerable at the Judgment — at least in theory. (There were spells to help get past any sticky spots, as well as assistance from Anubis, if necessary — he controlled the scales.)

But let's look at the thing in good faith. In brief, the deceased would appear in the Hall of Two Truths (or the Hall of Double Justice) and declare that he/she had done no wrong; forty-two petitions, one before each of the forty-two judges, representing the forty-two natural laws and the forty-two provinces of Egypt. *I have not stolen. I have not slain. I have not committed falsehood. I have not cursed God. I have not acted in lust, I have not acted with violence, I have not caused destruction, I have not exaggerated, I have not judged anyone hastily, etc.*

No. 36 is interesting: *I have not spoiled running water.* In other words, "I have not polluted the environment." Think about the critical importance of the Nile in the middle of the desert.

Then to be sure the suppliant was speaking "true of voice," there was the Weighing of the Heart on the scales of justice. All this is the business of Chapter 125 of *The Book of the Dead*.

"This was the first clear appearance of the notion that a person's moral character could influence their fate after death" (Taylor, p. 86). In the Negative Confession and the threat of eternal punishment for wrongdoing we have an ethical basis for behavior in life upon which, at least in theory, eternal life depends.

One of the key ethical principles, which was emphasized also in the Middle Kingdom Wisdom texts and Instructions, and in stories like the Eloquent Peasant, is the kindly, generous, fair and just treatment of those of lower station and the less fortunate. That may seem an unusual, unexpected and unprecedented ethic in an ancient society, when the surrounding world was steeped in bloodshed, gore and slavery. But the ethic did find its way into the Gospel of St. Matthew: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me" — i.e., Jesus, promoting fair treatment and right behavior in Chapter 25 of that Gospel; and, much earlier, Ezekiel 22:7 had urged care and consideration for widows and orphans.

Of course the Negative Confession sounds a lot like the Ten Commandments — not only in what is said, but even in the phrasing. Ellen Lloyd notes in www.AncientPages.com (July 15, 2017) that the received wisdom is that "the Ten Commandments [Exodus 20:2-17, Deuteronomy 5:6-21] were written by God upon two tablets of stone and then given to Moses on Mount Sinai ... around the 13th or 14th century B.C. What is interesting is that the Ten Commandments are very similar to the forty-two Principles of Ma'at that appeared at least 2,000 years earlier," she says. Many would greet that discovery with similar surprise — but they would not be Egyptologists.

When the deceased passed the Judgment, he was said to be "true of voice": he had spoken the words of truth and would enter eternal life — and the living words on his tomb would continue to speak the truth, forever. Listen to John 8:31: *If you continue in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.* We may not be seeing any direct transfer of text from this Egyptian myth to the Bible, of course. While this apparent parallel from a much older tradition may sound eerily familiar to Christians, it may not be evidence of influence. It is nevertheless interesting to see these thoughts come together over the space of more than 3,000 years. In the New Testament, the Gospel of St. John and the Book of Revelation seem to be particularly rich in these similarities.

Picture again the famous scene from Chapter 125 of *The Book of the Dead*: Anubis weighing the soul of the trembling suppliant; Thoth writing the verdict on his slate; the ugly beast Ammit crouching by the scales — a hybrid monster, part lion, part hippopotamus, part crocodile; Horus, leading the Justified — now spared from the "Second Death" in the jaws of The Devouress — by the hand to the throne of Osiris. In every depiction of this scene you see Ammit there waiting and drooling. Graphic depictions of torment such as this proved very useful 2,500-3,500 years later, in purposeful expressions ranging from Dante's *Inferno* to fire-and-brimstone sermons.

For the roots of that horror, we find in Revelation 20:12-15: "[A book was opened], the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.... and all were judged according to what they had done. Then

Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death.” (Ammit was also called “the Second Death.”) Obviously, we can find much earlier roots of that horror in the New Kingdom *Book of the Dead*.

No doubt there were many Egyptians, probably most, who were sincere in their piety and behavior regardless of the torments that awaited those who failed and despite the assistance of spells. The priestess Enhai is exemplary; in her funerary papyrus, she prays that she will not be distracted by material things or baser instincts, but seek only the knowledge that will keep her true and pure, and be acceptable in the sight of God.

That sounds very much like the most devout “People of the Book” — Jews, Christians and Muslims — would put it, at least ideally. Sincerity, piety and goodness are not recent inventions.

Original Sin and Salvation

As royal authority waned in the declining years of the reign of Pepi II (2278-2184), “Ideas of a transcendent afterlife in the company of the gods spread through the general population,” writes Toby Wilkinson (p. 126). “Earthly success and being well remembered were no longer enough. The hope of something better in the next world, of transfiguration and transformation, became paramount. Notions of what lay on the other side of death were elaborated, codified and combined in ever more inventive formulations.

“In the process, the ancient Egyptians devised the key concepts of original sin, an underworld rife with dangers and demons, a final judgment before the great god, and the promise of a glorious resurrection.”

Note that this period of time was around 2,200 years before the Gospels of the Christian Bible were written.

Models for Christianity and Islam

Christiane Noblecourt cited Christianity specifically as a beneficiary of Egyptian thought. “One of my rare courageous colleagues wrote a sentence which now seems indisputable,” she reported in *Gifts from the Pharaohs: How Egyptian Civilization Shaped the Modern World* (p. 259): “‘It was the Egyptian religion that paved the way to Christianity.’ Christianity did not need the Hebrew religion to be introduced into Egypt. There was no need for this agent because, from its origins, Egypt had already shown signs of Christian thinking.”

That may seem hard to swallow, but what she was referring to was an inscription on the tomb of a prince in Assiut, about 2000 B.C., that said: “The thought was always in my mind that I would reach God on this day of death,” i.e., without any intermediary — which is a very Egyptian way of thinking, and, Noblecourt believed, marked early Christian thought also.

And as for Islam, at the core of the ancient Egyptian mind was dedication to order, *ma’at*, and sustaining it with patient, perfect obedience. The meaning of Islam is “submission,” i.e., complete surrender and dedication to God (Allah). After the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 641 A.D., Islam grew in very fertile soil: devotion to religious beliefs and exact practices, and

total submission to the Divine had been central to the Egyptian mind for well over 3,000 years.

Symbols of Resurrection and Views of Eternity

Symbols of resurrection and hope, like the rainbow in the Old Testament and the empty tomb of Jesus in the New Testament, are abundant in the ancient Egyptian culture, focused so intensely, as it was, on eternal life.

A popular misconception is that the ancient Egyptians were obsessed with death, since archeology has handed down so much evidence of a funerary fixation. In fact it was just the opposite: they were obsessed with life, and with the continuation of life beyond the grave. Hence they used the same word, *ankh*, for both earthly life and the afterlife. And they never called their New Kingdom funerary text *The Book of the Dead*; to them it was *The Book of Going Forth by Day*.

They saw the proof of resurrection in the daily return (rebirth) of the sun; the annual regeneration of the crops; the germination of the grain; the annual flood that brought rich silt for the fields and life-giving water; the annual return of the star Sirius (Sopdet) after seventy days below the horizon, to begin the new year; the lotus (water lily), whose blossoms closed at night and reopened in the morning; the scarab, or dung beetle (*kheper*), pushing ahead of itself a ball of dung, an orb like Ra, from which the young beetles emerged, fed and fit (*kheper*, from *khepri*: “he who becomes”; *khepri* is Ra at dawn); and the tilapia fish (*ienet*), that incubates its eggs in its mouth, then releases new life into the world. Tilapia are often shown with vertical wavy lines in place of scales; the wavy lines spell *mw* (mu), “water,” and indicate water rising, i.e., rebirth.

The Christian vision of “Heaven” as an ideal and real place, both perfect and physical, would resonate well with the ancient Egyptians. They saw the world beyond — *Amentet*, The West, land of the blessed dead (the Westerners: *Amentiu*, those who had gone “west”), Lightland — as a garden where you could float on the Lake of Flowers and enjoy a cool breeze — like Eden. In this world, work is hard and you have aches and pains; in the next world, you can still till the fields and go about your normal life as you wish, but the work is not hard, you don’t have any aches and pains, and you have servants (*shabtis*) to help with everything from field work to household chores.

Death? Simply a change of state, like retiring in good health with nothing to worry about. Mortality allowed a person to become young again; death was a reset button.

In the Pyramid Texts in the pyramid of Unas, this is inscribed on the south wall of the burial chamber: *You have not gone away dead. You have gone away alive. Go and follow your sun, and be beside God, and leave your house to the son of your begetting. You shall not perish, you shall not end. Your identity will remain among the people even as it comes to be among the gods.*

The deceased was planted in the earth like a seed, waiting to be energized by the *Ka* to new life, just as the sun itself was reborn each day, to provide light and warmth to reawaken the lotus, in an endless cycle of death and resurrection. The certainty of the sun’s return each morning and the crops’ regeneration each spring made it just as certain that the dead would be resurrected. The sun had the energy of heat and light, and the person had 13

the energy of the *Ka*, a spiritual life-force. Mummification created a cocoon from which new life could emerge, just as the example of the dung beetle showed.

As mentioned earlier, there were two concepts of eternity: **cyclical** (*neheh*) and **continuing** (*djet*, eternal continuity, *djet-ta*, “forever”). The diurnal cycle of the sun and the annual cycle of the seasons and crops were *neheh*, but if a cycle is repeated endlessly eternity becomes infinite. Eternity was expressed also with the *shen* circle — *shenu*, “round” — which, when elongated into a cartouche, provided eternal protection for the king’s name (*ren*), a vital aspect of his being.

The Vindicated and the Apostles’ Creed

“**W**eary, weary are the members of Osiris! They shall not be weary, they shall not putrefy, they shall not decay, they shall not swell up! May it be done to me in like manner, for I am Osiris” (Chapter 45, Papyrus of Ani, a scribe during the reign of Seti I, 19th Dynasty).

Ani, who has died and was resurrected, has joined what would be called, in Christian terms, “the Church Triumphant,” i.e., those who are in Heaven; in Egyptian terms, “the Justified,” “the Blessed Dead.” Ani is now an “Osiris.” Each person, when vindicated in the Hall of Two Truths, became “an Osiris” and was referred to henceforth as “Osiris N,” in this case, “Osiris Ani.”

Some of the Christians’ Apostle’s Creed would have a familiar ring and find much agreement among the ancient Egyptians: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” The “holy spirit” they might read as the *Ka* (life-force, spiritual double), so that would be fine with them; “catholic” (“universal”), the “resurrection of the body” and the “life everlasting,” check, check, check.

The sticking point, and a temporary one at that, would be the “forgiveness of sins,” which technically was not guaranteed at the Judgment; you could be found guilty, at least in theory. But as we have seen, provisions were made via ritual, word and deed to circumvent that problem, so failure was most unlikely.

“The resurrection of the body” is particularly interesting in light of *The Book of Going Forth by Day* Chapter 45, as given above, and Chapter 70: “As for him who knows this book on earth, he shall come out into the day, he shall walk on earth among the living, and his name shall not perish forever.”

Let us remember that *The Book of Going Forth by Day* is a New Kingdom text; a millenium earlier, the Pyramid Texts were likewise assuring Unas, Teti and others of their resurrection — 2,500 years before the Gospels of the Christian New Testament, and nearly 3,000 years before the Apostle’s Creed.

Mummification

The Egyptians believed it was necessary to go into the afterlife with your body intact and preserved, hence the embalming and mummification process. They used natron, a salt, to dry out the body and they packed the corpse with linen, straw or mud so it would keep its shape and the person’s features would be the same as when he/she was alive. (At the funeral

home, you hear people say “He looks so *natural*.” That would make sense to the Egyptians.) After the Middle Kingdom the outer coffin was typically painted with a face or a face mask was included to provide a spare in order to guarantee that the deceased’s appearance would endure.

The whole mummification process took seventy days. The drying-out process took forty days; the other thirty days were devoted to ritual and incantations associated with the wrapping of the mummy. Why seventy days? It was a multiple of the magical number seven and the star Sirius (*Sopdet* to the Egyptians) reappeared after being hidden below the horizon for seventy days each year; when it reappeared — also a resurrection, like the sun each day — it signaled the New Year, about July 20.

(The Bible mentions mummification in Genesis 50:1-3; it also says that Jacob was mummified, and makes reference to the corruption of the flesh, so it appears that the Egyptian ways had some influence.)

Incidentally, Judaism is opposed to cremation officially and it is totally forbidden in Islam, but most Christian sects allow it.

The Importance of Three and Seven

For the Egyptians, the number three was plurality, there were three seasons, three weeks in a month, triads of three, three realms (Heaven, Earth and Underworld). The number four was totality (four pillars of Earth, four cardinal directions, four tutelary goddesses, four Sons of Horus, four Osirian siblings in Heliopolitan myth, four first principles of the universe in Hermopolitan theology, etc.). Now, $3 + 4 = 7$.

Seven was Egypt’s magical number and three of its multiples (fourteen, forty-two and seventy) shared the magic. The Seven Hathors were involved with fate and destiny. Seven knots were tied in the string used to place an amulet on a sick child. There were seven cows in Chapter 148 of *The Book of the Dead*. Ra had seven *Bas* and fourteen *Kas* (the *Ba* and the *Ka* were aspects of the spiritual being of an individual, called *kheperu*, “manifestations of the self”). Seth chopped Osiris into fourteen pieces. There were fourteen false doors in the perimeter wall at Djoser’s pyramid in Saqqara. At the Judgment the dead presented themselves before forty-two judges representing forty-two natural laws and Egypt’s forty-two provinces to recite the forty-two petitions of the Negative Confession. As noted above, seventy days were required for the embalming and mummification process and the accompanying rituals. And seventy days after the death of the king, the new king was crowned.

In the Bible we find that Lamech lived 777 years (Genesis 5:31), God tells Noah to take seven pairs of animals and seven pairs of birds because in seven days he will turn on the flood (i.e., the **J** version, Genesis 7:2-4), the ark came to rest in the seventh month and Noah waited seven days to send out the dove to look for land (Genesis 8:12), Jacob worked for Laban seven years to secure his bride — twice, in fact (Genesis 29), Joseph predicted seven years of famine and seven years of plenty (Genesis 41) — and that’s just in Genesis; altogether there are 737 references to “seven” in the Bible, in some form — and that’s not counting any multiples. You could say, well, that’s the number of days in a week, of course; except that in Egypt a week was ten days. So if the importance of seven came from Egypt, it **14**

was based on mythology, not on the calendar.

In both Judaism and Islam, seven is very prominent. In fact, Rabbi Eliyahu Safran (Orthodox Union, www.ou.org) says, “No number has the power and significance of the number seven. It is Judaism’s most sacred number. Seven is completeness and wholesomeness.... [it] joins for all eternity the Creator and His Creation, God and His people ... the Sabbath is the seventh day, Shemittah, the seventh year, Yovel, the culmination of seven cycles of seven years.”

In Islam there are seven Heavens and seven gates of Hell, which has seven levels (also like Dante’s *Inferno*); there are seven verses in the first Sura of the Quran, pilgrims walk seven times around the Kaaba in Mecca on the Hajj pilgrimage, as well as seven times between Mount Safa and Mount Marwah, etc.

As for Christianity, in the Book of Revelation seven seals are opened, the seventh of which introduces the seven trumpets played by seven angels; when the seventh trumpet sounds the temple of God opens in heaven amid lightning, thunder, earthquake, noise and hail, and the seven spiritual figures appear; and there are seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues. Also in Revelation there are the seven churches, the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars, a dragon with seven heads and seven diadems on each head, etc.

And three? Again, look at Christianity — the Holy Family, the three days Jesus was among the dead, the last three days of Holy Week, the three wise men at the manger in Bethlehem, and the Trinity, “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

Is there a connection in this focus on numbers? As in so much of this, all we can say is that all of these religions sprang up within 200 miles of Egypt, and there was a lot of movement, trade and immigration in the region over a period of perhaps 4,000 years before the Torah was assembled — in addition to the Hebrews’ likely 400-year sojourn in Egypt. (We will deal with that more thoroughly on pp. 28-29.)

The Parting of the Waters

The 3rd Dynasty king Seneferu (2575-2551 B.C.), father of Khufu, was wandering through the palace, bored, so his aides suggested that maybe a boat ride would improve his spirits — a boat rowed by twenty fetching young women dressed only in fish nets. Sure enough, it gladdened Seneferu, and everything went well until one of the women became distressed because her turquoise pendant fell into the water. (In another version it was a golden lotus in her hair.) Seneferu took pity on her and said he would get her a replacement, but she said no, she wanted the one that fell in the water.

So Seneferu summoned his chief lector-priest (a magician), who said a magic spell that made the water part, so he could retrieve the pendant lying on the bottom. The water that had been twelve cubits deep had become twenty-four cubits (about thirty-six feet) deep when it was turned back, the story says — that is, two cliffs of water twice as high as the normal depth, so the boat was on the bottom of the lake. Then with another spell the magician returned the waters to their normal place.

That story may sound familiar. In addition to the so-called parting of the “Red” [i.e., Reed] Sea, the Bible tells that when Elijah and Elisha wanted to cross the River Jordan, Elijah took

off his coat, rolled it up and struck the water with it, and the water “was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground” (2 Kings 2:8); then Elisha tried it himself, and the water parted for him, too (2 Kings 2:14).

Magical Egypt

“**I**n the Old Testament, Egypt was already a land of magic ... there have been attempts to connect all great magicians with Egypt” (Hornung, *Secret Lore*, p. 55) — and, not surprisingly, one of them was Jesus. “As early as Origen’s *Contra Celsus*, we encounter the claim that it was in Egypt, and specifically as an adult laborer, that Jesus had learned all the magical arts with which he worked miracles.” As mentioned earlier, no one knows for sure where Jesus was between ages twelve and thirty, so Egypt must remain a possibility.

The apostle Mark, as noted earlier also, traveled to Alexandria and became the first patriarch of the Coptic Christian Church, which is seated there. In the first chapter of the Gospel of St. Mark, he refers to the “authority” evident in Jesus’ power: “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

A Coptic story tells how Horus came down with a stomach ache after eating a raw bird and wanted his mother to help him, since she was a goddess of healing. She did cure him, and then the story concludes with this: “It is I who speak, the lord Jesus, who grants healing” (Hornung, *Secret Lore*, p. 61).

“There was an obvious analogy between the Horus child and the baby Jesus and the care they received from their sacred mothers; long before Christianity, Isis had borne the epithet ‘mother of the god’” (p. 60). Hornung mentions too that “even in Coptic [Christian] love charms, the magician slips into the role of Horus” and seeks the assistance of Isis, his mother.

But in the Quran, also, “Egypt often makes its appearance as a land of powerful sorcerers” (p. 61) and in the Jewish Talmud, “of the ten measures of magic that had come into the world, Egypt received nine and the rest of the world only one.” The Christians’ New Testament also mentions that “Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds” (Acts 7:22).

The People of the Book are in agreement: Egypt is a magical place.

The Wife of God

At the beginning of the New Kingdom, around 1550 B.C., the pharaoh Ahmose established a new tradition by naming his queen “God’s Wife of Amun.” The office continued for a few generations, fell into disuse, and then was resurrected much later when kings resident in the North needed trusted representatives in the South to control the Amun priesthood. At that juncture the person picked to be God’s Wife of Amun was typically an unmarried daughter of the pharaoh, who remained unmarried and did ritual service in the temple, and the position took on real power, because the God’s Wife of Amun outranked the High Priest of Amun.

The women who held this important position from that time on took their holy office very seriously, remained celibate, **15**

and took a prenomen, “usually containing the name of Mut, the consort of Amun, to be used alongside her given name” (Robins, p. 156). By all accounts they were dedicated earnestly and completely to their religious roles — much as the nuns of the Roman Catholic Church consider themselves “brides of Christ,” remain unmarried in order to focus their lives on devoted service, and may take a new name, similar to a prenomen or epithet, reflecting their religious role, e.g., “Sister Mary Joseph.”

Whether the Roman Catholic Church actually took any hints from this prior Egyptian model would be a matter of idle speculation, but it seems plausible that since the Romans occupied Egypt for several centuries, well into the Christian era — and the Greeks were there for 300 years before the Romans — those who formed the emerging church would have had plenty of exposure to Egyptian history.

In addition, the office of the God’s Wife of Amun showed that dedicated women could exert considerable influence and control. That’s the sort of thing that would be hard to find happening anywhere in the ancient world except Egypt.

The Incarnate God on Earth

The son of God became incarnate and dwelled among us on Earth, as a living man. Is this St. John, speaking of Jesus? No, this is Osiris, as we have seen, and also — from the time of Amenhotep III in the 18th Dynasty — the king. Amenhotep declared himself a living god, leading his son Akhenaten to do likewise. Prior to that time, kings were semi-divine during their reigns and became fully divine at death.

Nevertheless, especially in the New Kingdom, they were often referred to as “the god,” or “the great god,” while still living, but that may have been more a respectful reference than a religious recognition. Grave robbers referred to “the god” in their confessions, mentioning their desecration of the king’s mummy and Mansion of Eternity (tomb, coffin); surely the word “god” would not have meant to them what we would assume.

There’s much in the Egyptian way of thinking that doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense to us. Since the king was the semi-divine, living son of god on Earth, the descendent of Horus, living among us, to the Egyptian mind he must have been divine even before death — even before Amenhotep III declared that he was. Actually, we may be able to understand that better than we think; John 1:14: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us ...full of grace and truth.*

Son of the One True God

Only one God exists. All other gods are false, and an abomination to the true God. All the people are children of God, and should worship his Son, for through Him alone they may be granted eternal life. Let all praise the Son with hymns as offerings in his name.

John 1:12: “*all people are the children of God*”? Is “the Son” Jesus Christ? No, it’s the pharaoh Akhenaten, who, in the 14th century B.C., decreed a new religion based solely on the Aten, the sun-disk, and disallowed all the other gods (except Ra, who

was seen as a form of the Aten, so he was kept on).

Akhenaten declared further that the only objects of worship were himself, as the son of the Aten, and his wife Nefertiti.

He discharged the priests of Amun, the chief deity of Egypt at the time, and those of all other persuasions; he closed the temples and ransacked them for their treasures.

He built a new capital (Akhetaten) in the middle of nowhere, 180 miles north, which depleted the treasury, and abandoned Thebes — which was no small matter: Thebes was the religious capital of Egypt and the country’s second city, with a population of 50,000 people, most of whom were dependent on the temple for their livelihood. So the local economy was destroyed.

The statues of gods were gone and in their place were statues of Akhenaten and Nefertiti.

Temples now had an open courtyard filled with small altars where Akhenaten alone represented humankind before the Aten — people were expected to worship him, and then he would pass it on for them (presumably, if he chose to do so).

His troops got people out of their homes and shops to line the street and cheer as he drove his chariot from the palace to the office each morning, and again when he went back home.

Akhenaten was especially determined to stamp out the worship of Amun and Osiris, both of them powerful competitors who could easily draw attention away from himself and his divinity.

Well, no wonder. Aten was an abstract god-concept; Aten was “Light.” How do you worship “Light”? The people were used to a personal god they could picture in human terms, an anthropomorphic friend — Osiris especially.

I bring up Akhenaten for two reasons, noting that the Hebrews were there throughout this time, and had been for at least 300 years, so they must have heard all about current events and local lore. Some have theorized that Akhenaten may have been a model for Moses — a notion that immediately invites attack.

His religious reform has been called the first attempt in history to institute monotheism, disclaiming all other deities in deference to one god. That campaign failed completely, but for about a dozen of the 3,000 years of Egypt’s dynastic history, Akhenaten made quite a name for himself.

Even a cursory look at Akhenaten’s conduct and self-aggrandizing exposes the folly of seeing his movement as the foundation of monotheism — at least monotheism as we know it from the examples of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We might be more correct in seeing this not as monotheism but as henotheism, in which one god is supreme. Nevertheless, although Akhenaten’s practices and theology would be anathema to the People of the Book, the idea of a single god did surface, albeit briefly.

The other reason I bring him up is Psalm 104. Akhenaten had more interest in poetry and hymn-writing than he did in governing and securing Egypt’s borders. As national security eroded, Akhenaten schmoozed with Nefertiti and his children, and indulged his passion for self-expression. His best-known creation is the *Hymn to the Aten*, which has frequently been cited for its similarities to Psalm 104. (Friedman calls the parallels “not compelling,” however; *The Exodus*, p. 139.) While some expressions and images seem alike, and both have a common theme and sense of devotion, most striking is the similarity in style.

First, here is Akhenaten’s hymn, which I have reassembled from two sources in order to include omissions in each: **16**

Akhenaten's Hymn to the Aten

*Splendid you rise in heaven's lightland, O living Aten, creator of life!
When you have dawned in eastern lightland, you fill every land with your beauty.
You are beauteous, great, radiant, high over every land.
Your rays embrace the lands to the limits of all that you have made.
All eyes are on your beauty until you set. All labor ceases when you rest in the West.
When you set in the western horizon, the Earth is in darkness, as if it were dead.
When you rise and shine as the sun in the day, you dispel the darkness with your beams.
The Two Lands keep festival and awake; all beasts are content with their pasture.
The trees and bushes are verdant; the birds fly out of their nests and their wings praise your Ka.
All wild beasts dance on their feet, all that fly and flutter, they live when you arise for them.
You have fashioned the Earth according to your desire. You arise as the living sun.
You are in my heart, and there is none other that knows you, save your son,
Whom you make to comprehend your designs and your might,
The Lord of the Two Lands, the sole one of Ra, the son of Ra, Akhenaten.
When you rise you stir everyone for the King; every leg is on the move.
You rouse them for your son who came from your body, the King who lives by ma'at, the Lord of the Two Lands.*

Now, for stylistic comparison and imagery, here are some excerpts from **Psalm 104** (*New Revised Standard Version*):

*Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
...
You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.
You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.
...
They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them.
You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.
You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
They flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
...
The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees.
...
You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God.
...
O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.
....
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the Lord.*

Are they close enough to be related? Of course, the similarities and commonalities could be coincidental; then again, the poetic imagery, cadences and style in the Book of Psalms had to come from somewhere, so perhaps the Hymn to the Aten should not be dismissed out of hand as a possibility, at least.

Then too there's the Papyrus of Hunefer, a scribe in the time of Seti I, which uses similar imagery and style to express its devotion. This was about 1300 B.C., at least a generation after Akhenaten, but it still reflects the Amarna manner.

*Homage to you, principle of light,
in your rising and in your setting!
You rise, you shine, glorious as the king of the laws.
You are the Lord of Heaven and Earth, maker of the heavenly*

*beings above and the earthly beings below,
One principle, maker of the world,
creator of mankind, maker of the water of Nun,
Creator of the River Nile, maker of the water
which gives life therein.
Maker of Heaven and Earth, adoration to you!*

The Temple, the House of God

Egyptian temples, Karnak in particular, were aligned along two axes: the north-south axis symbolized the Nile, but the really important axis, east-west, traced the route

of the sun from sunrise to sunset — Ra's diurnal cycle of birth in the East to death in the West and back through the night to be born again each morning. So the cycle was a physical statement of the spiritual journey of both god and man.

The temple was the house of God, just as a church, temple or mosque is often referred to today, but the Egyptians believed the innermost sanctum of the temple was the actual residence of god, so they took the phrase even more literally; this *sanctum sanctorum* was *djeser-djeseru* in Egyptian (the Holy of Holies, *naos* in Greek). No one but the high priest (or the king) could enter the inner sanctum of the temple. Of course, there wasn't much reason for anyone else to be there, since the temple was not a place of worship; the high priest's only purpose was to attend the god.

The Israelites likewise allowed no one but the priests inside their temple, which also featured a Holy of Holies, inside of which were two cherubs — not babies with wings and arrows, but sphinxes with an animal's body and human head, just like the Egyptian sphinxes, differentiated only by the wings that the Hebrews added, perhaps influenced by Mesopotamia.

In the *djeser-djeseru*, the god's residence may be raised a few steps, symbolizing the Primeval Mound of Egyptian Creation lore, just as the altar in a Christian cathedral and most other churches is raised somewhat above the surrounding plane. In the medieval Gothic cathedrals in Europe, those built before the Counter Reformation, there is a "rood screen" that separates the rest of the sanctuary from the high altar beyond, where the Eucharist is sanctified during the Mass. Also in traditional Roman Catholic churches, there is the Tabernacle on the altar, where the Host (sacramental bread, the "Body of Christ") is kept. In the Jewish temple, the Torah occupies the same exalted spot.

All this may be purely coincidental, of course, and in no way influential, but it is nevertheless interesting that the Egyptians created architecture that reflected their concepts about the sanctity of their holy places, just as the People of the Book do.

But the Egyptians carried their architectural analogies much further, drawing deeply from the mythical well. A state temple like Karnak was a microcosm of the world at Creation; the papyrus columns symbolized the watery marsh from which the first land — the Primeval Mound, *Tatenen* — rose to create Egypt at the center of the world. The enclosure wall that separated the temple from the outside world was made of undulating courses of mudbrick, replicating the primordial ocean of Nun.

The temples had ponds, "sacred lakes" (*she-netjeru* or *Ra-she*), that likewise symbolized the primordial waters before Creation, and whenever the pharaoh was in residence, water from the sacred lake was used to wash him each morning for ritual purposes. The priests also washed themselves three times each day with this water to purify themselves for their sacred duties.

"Appearing" was the term Egyptians used for the rise, or manifestation, of a king — something like "epiphany." Palaces in the New Kingdom had a "Window of Appearances" where the pharaoh could show himself to the people below, rather like the Pope's balcony in St. Peter Square. Again, no direct influence should be taken from this, but it is another instance of architecture in service of official purpose.

The Egyptians used gargoyles as protections against evil, and also as roof drains on their temples — just as the Gothic cathedrals in medieval Europe did 2,000-3,000 years later, for both spiritual and practical purposes.

"Many kings claimed that they, like Horus, had been chosen to rule 'while still in the egg.' In practice, it was the inauguration rituals that turned the chosen heir into 'the living Horus'" (Pinch, p. 87). A case could be made for more recent but also profound transformations through ritual in European coronations and the investiture of senior clergy, especially that of a Pope as the spiritual descendent of St. Peter and one empowered to speak infallibly.

Incense figured prominently in Egyptian religious rites — not surprisingly, given the importance of air and fragrance, the breath of life that enters through the nose. The gift of life is shown presented to mortals by deities in the form of an *ankh*, or as incense extended on the end of a wand like a peace pipe, and in a reciprocal gesture mortals offer lotuses to the deities in return. The most sacred form of incense was myrrh, but frankincense was a close second in the rituals.

Incidentally, both of those, along with gold, were considered the most befitting gifts to give to a king. Interestingly, gold came from Nubia, south of Egypt, and from Egypt's eastern desert; frankincense came from Nubia as well; and myrrh from Punt (now Eritrea or Somalia), somewhere around the Horn of East Africa, far southeast of Egypt — but none of them from the area east of Bethlehem, 1,700 miles north.

The last rite before putting the mummy in the tomb was the Opening of the Mouth ceremony. They stood the mummy upright and a priest touched the wrappings over the lips with an adze (a *meskhettyu* wand in the shape of a *setep* glyph = "chosen"), and said, "I open your mouth, that you may speak." This opened the way for the deceased to enter the Underworld and speak "true of voice" for himself at the Judgment, so he could be reborn.

In the Roman Catholic last rites — Extreme Unction or, as the rite is called now, the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick — priests may press a crucifix to the person's lips. There may be no connection whatsoever, but it is interesting.

Devout believers wanted to make a pilgrimage to Abydos, where the cult of Osiris was centered, at least once in their lifetime. Muslims too are supposed to go to Mecca at least once in their lifetimes, if they can, and pilgrimages have figured importantly in Christianity for two millenia — immortalized in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, for instance.

The Egyptian Wake

Coffins in the 12th Dynasty (1985-1773, per Ian Shaw's Oxford chronology) portrayed a wake held the night before the funeral in the embalming tent on the edge of the desert, in which some of the embalming procedures were symbolically reprised, torches were lit and women in the roles of the Two Kites (Isis and Nebthet) droned in mournful tones.

"And then the drama starts," says Dorothea Arnold, in *Ancient Egypt Transformed*, citing an observation by Jan Assmann (Arnold, p. 19). According to the plot set forth in the Coffin Texts, a character portraying Seth attacks the deceased (now an "Osiris"), guardians are summoned to help, and then the *imiut* appears, and also Anubis, guardian of the necropolis (and in his alter ego as Wepwawet, "Opener of the Ways," ready to

escort the dead to The West). Everyone rejoices at these good signs, but “the fear of death is in the air — a fear that will be lifted only when the sun rises.” In the New Kingdom, the wake could last four days and three nights.

Passion play, medieval pageant, Danse Macabre, fire-and-brimstone revival, All Hallow’s Eve spookiness, John Donne eulogy, Halloween in Washington Square — an Irish wake pales by comparison; but with a uniquely Egyptian addition: the *imiut*.

Objects Associated with Divinity

The *imiut*, a ritual object fashioned to look like a headless animal draped around a pole, “demonstrates how certain materials endowed an image with divine powers,” writes Arnold. “Rejuvenating ointments were much used in Egyptian rituals, and linen wrappings were so closely associated with divinity that one of the hieroglyphs meaning ‘god’ depicts a pole wrapped with linen bands.” (You see the *imiut* beside the scribe Ani as he appears before Osiris in his *Book of the Dead* papyrus.)

Jews, Christians and Muslims could make quite a list of things in their own faiths that are considered to be “endowed with divine powers” or at least “associated with divinity,” and may seem as strange to archeologists 5,000 years from now as the *imiut* does to us today.

In terms of physical presence, there is a chasm of difference between a baroque Roman Catholic church in Bavaria, heavy with gold and marble columns, angelic cherubs and exquisitely carved side-altars, and the absolute barrenness of, say, a Presbyterian church on the Isle of Lewis. But the splendor itself, and the very absence of it, as well, are obvious religious statements associated with divinity in ways that are powerful and meaningful to the adherents of the faith.

The *imiut*, the *ankh*, the *djeneh* wings and scores of other symbols were invested with importance and meaning for the ancient Egyptians, and I have no doubt that while they would not know the meaning of the Menorah, the Cross or the Kaaba, the significance of such things would not mystify them.

Mobility and Motility

The Ark of the Covenant was a portable tabernacle to maintain the continuing presence of God as the Hebrews traveled from place to place. Enormous attention to that, in great detail, is provided in Exodus 35-38. The thing that may seem odd to Jews, Christians and Muslims today is why they would have to do that — wasn’t God transcendent, omnipresent? Apparently some of the Hebrews, at least, thought not. Where might they have picked up that idea?

In Egypt, the gods had mobility but not motility: they were portable but didn’t travel on their own. They were resident in their temples, so there had to be a lot of temples to extend their reach, rather like cellular phone towers, so a traveler could keep in contact with his god by reconnecting as he went. Myths made the god accessible, but temples made the god available. (Therefore there was a lot of temple construction, which meant employment and a robust economy.)

In both early Judaism and modern Christianity even now, the

temple or church is not only the House of God but, in the minds of some, the only place where their rites of worship are entirely valid.

The alternative to having a temple of residence for the deity was to carry the god’s image around on a barque, on the shoulders of priests, during festival processions.

Religious Festivals and Processions

There were many religious festivals in ancient Egypt — by the 20th Dynasty, there were sixty festival days each year, on average one festival every six days (Teeter, p. 56). These festivals might include pageants, something like passion plays, hymns, rituals and, especially, processions during which people could get close to the images of their gods as they were carried through the streets. The procession would pause from time to time for the people to pray, meditate and ask questions of the oracle, at stops called the Stations of the Gods.

Such processions are common today in many areas with strong Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, and often include images of God, Jesus, Mary and other saints, mounted on platforms and carried on shoulders.

“No doubt, Saint Peter’s heirs [the Roman Catholic Popes] borrowed something from ancient Egypt’s rituals,” wrote Christiane Noblecourt — certainly not the first to make note of that.

The Middle Kingdom autobiography of Ikhnofret tells of a dramatic performance that was part of the annual religious festival of Osiris at Abydos, in which the god’s life, death, and resurrection were re-enacted — very much like a modern passion play (Dodson, *Ancient Egypt*, p. 192).

The physical presence of objects (icons, crooks, censers, crosses, idols on barques, tabernacles, etc.) and the movement inherent in a procession or parade make a moment present and special — something is happening and anyone there at the time is experiencing it. There is kinetic energy in it.

No doubt people of all faiths, at some time, would have discovered the psychological power of the procession on their own — it’s such a natural and obvious thing to do, for purposes of community ritual. We can’t say the Egyptians influenced anyone else to do that. All we can say is that they did it first.

Fine Oil Upon the Head

Banquet scenes in the New Kingdom Tombs of the Nobles — the famous one is Nakht, TT52 — portray lavish social events complete with naked serving girls, dancers, acrobats, musicians, and beautiful young women dressed in their finest and equipped with cones on their heads — scent cones of animal or vegetable fat infused with sweet-smelling perfume, which, over the course of the evening, in the hot climate of Egypt, would melt, leaving dark streaks on their faces, necks and clothing. Or so the story goes; since the scenes in the tombs show everyone only at their best, we don’t have before-and-after comparisons to draw upon.

But wait, perhaps the Bible can verify this. Psalm 33: “*It is like fine oil upon the head, flowing down upon the beard, upon the beard of Aaron, flowing down upon the collar of his*” 19

robe.” Or Psalm 23: “...you anoint my head with oil.” Anointing with oil seems to be an enduring idea; perhaps it is an archetype.

But when we add the importance of scent in the ancient Egyptian mentality, the dubious value of having melted fat run down your neck during a social gathering becomes less peculiar. Perhaps it’s an idea that found acceptance among the Hebrews in Egypt and migrated along with them.

Mutual Awareness?

In the Bible there are 1,097 references to “Egypt” (675), “Egyptians” (137), and “Pharaoh” (285). But in all of the written records in Egypt there is *only one* reference to Israel. It appears on a stela on which Merenptah, Ramesses II’s thirteenth son and successor, commemorates the defeat of a people (not a place) called “Israel” in a skirmish around 1205 or 1207 B.C., about which he boasts: “Israel is laid waste. Its seed is no more.” That’s it.

The Egyptians did make some note of the “Apiru,” or “Habiru” tribes of the Levant, i.e., probably Hebrews, but it is clear that Egypt made a much bigger impression on the Hebrews than the Hebrews did on the Egyptians. That point becomes significant when we consider the circumstances of the Exodus — which we will, in some detail, on p. 28.

Fictional Forebears

The Tale of Sinuhe

Three fictional works from ancient Egypt bear mention. (See Miriam Lichtheim’s *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, the premier scholarly text on the subject, for the full stories and her commentaries.)

Perhaps the best known is “*The Tale of Sinuhe*.” The servant Sinuhe panics when he learns that the pharaoh has been assassinated; fearing that he will be entangled in their affair, he flees to Asia and eventually becomes a powerful man. But as he gets older, he longs to return to Egypt: “O God, grant me to see the place where my heart dwells.... May he hear the prayer of one far off, may he restore him whom he had stricken to a far-off place. O may the King of Egypt show mercy to me, that I may live by his mercy.... O let my flesh grow young again, for old age has befallen, feebleness has overtaken me.”

At last, at the gracious invitation of the king of Egypt, he does return to Egypt, where the king welcomes him and forgives him for whatever he may have done, and rewards him lavishly.

This story, which would seem to be a model for the Prodigal Son story in the Gospel of St. Luke, is fiction, but the references to the two pharaohs and the circumstances involved pin it down to around 1890-1875, based on the assassination of Amenemhet I and the succession of his son Senuseret I — nearly 2,000 years before Luke.

The Eloquent Peasant

“*The Eloquent Peasant*,” a Middle Kingdom tale also dating to about 1875 B.C., concerns a peasant who has been cheated and treated horribly by a person of higher station and brings his complaint before a chief steward, who is so impressed with his

eloquence that he takes the man to the king, where he repeats pleading his case until he is worn out. In fact, the peasant is called back to court eight times — nine times in all; nine, we recall, is the “plural of plurals,” i.e., three times three, and indicates the extremity of something, in this case judicious argument. At last the peasant receives justice and recompense.

The story has been likened to the parables in the New Testament. Here’s an example from the Egyptian story: *Do justice for the sake of the Lord of Justice [ma’at]. When goodness is good it is truly good, for justice is for eternity: it enters the graveyard with its doer. When he is buried and earth enfolds him, his name does not perish from the earth; he is remembered because of goodness. That is the rule of god’s divine word.... Speak justice, do justice. For it is mighty; it is great, it endures. It will obtain for you merit, and will lead you to veneration.*

One passage in particular stands out, in retrospect: *Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do* — in other words, the Golden Rule, expressed in Leviticus 19:18 and, much later, attributed to Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

The Tale of Two Brothers

“*The Tale of Two Brothers*” (from the time of Seti II, 1200-1194 B.C., 19th Dynasty) concerns two brothers, the elder Anpu (Gr. Anubis) and Bata, peasants who farm and raise cattle together. When the innocent young Bata rejects the advances of Anpu’s seductive wife, she tells Anpu that Bata attempted to seduce her and beat her. Of course, the result is predictable: Anpu tries to kill Bata, Bata flees, Bata tries to tell his brother his side of the story, then goes away and establishes himself in Lebanon, and Anpu goes home and kills his wife. The gods take pity on Bata, and Khnum, the god who fashions human beings on a potter’s wheel, makes a wife for Bata.

At this point it gets rather tangled, to say the least, but in brief, Bata’s wife turns out to be fickle and hooks up with the pharaoh, and engages in various magical efforts to put an end to Bata. But a splinter from Bata, who meanwhile has become a persea tree, ends up in his wife’s mouth and gets her pregnant. (The Egyptians thought the alimentary and birth canals were connected.) She gives birth to a son; since she is now the king’s wife, her son is the crown prince — but since the seed that created him was from Bata, the crown prince is actually the resurrected Bata. So when the pharaoh dies, he becomes king, and appoints his elder brother Anpu as crown prince. The brothers are again at peace and no longer peasants, but royalty.

In such a fantastic story with such an outlandish plot, it is easy to see the roots of opera. However, while operas were written for entertainment, Egyptian stories always had meaning and message beyond the stories themselves — order, justice, truth, righteousness, obedience, reward for good behavior, maintenance of the social and civil order, and respect for deities, royals and nobles.

Genesis 39:7-20 tells a story that is identical to the first part of this New Kingdom story: Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph, who refused her advances, but was falsely accused and thrown into prison. From there on the Egyptian story, on the other hand, proceeds into fantastic, magical goings-on that have no obvious biblical echoes, but still in the split of the two brothers and the feud resulting from injustice, and in the eventual reconciliation and the happy ending thanks to the power of

forgiveness, the goodness of the gods and the graciousness of Bata, the New Testament seems present in spirit if not in content.

Also Bata's resurrection and miraculous self-regeneration remind us of Osiris' revivification and post-mortem impregnation of Isis. By the time all that reaches Christianity, it is considerably filtered, but not discarded.

The Secret Lore of Egypt (Hornung)

Readers are directed to Eric Hornung's monumental book, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West*, which wades into the subject of Egyptian influence much more deeply. Here are some tantalizing excerpts:

"In the Old Kingdom, the god's violent traits still predominated... In the Pyramid Texts, he lops off heads and cuts out hearts" (p. 6). In this case, it is Thoth who is the god of wrath and vengeance, but we recall also Ra's rage, sufficient to slay humankind for insubordination. Later on, both of them assumed kinder, gentler characters. The Bible likewise offers a dual portrayal of God, both vengeful and benevolent.

Regarding the fall of humankind from a paradisiacal condition, Hornung mentions that in the Egyptian *Book of the Heavenly Cow* (c. 1350 B.C.) there is "a precedent for later gnostic teachings about redemption. The text accounts for the present, imperfect condition of the world" (p. 16).

"Early Christianity was deeply indebted to ancient Egypt," Hornung declares. "In particular, the lively picture of the ancient Egyptian afterlife left traces in Christian texts; thus, among the Copts, and later in Islam, we encounter a fiery hell quite like that of the Egyptians" (p. 73).

"The Christian slayer of the dragon had its model in the triumph of Horus over Seth, and there was a smooth transition from the nursing Isis to that of Mary. The miraculous birth of Jesus could be viewed as analogous to that of Horus, whom Isis conceived posthumously from Osiris" (p. 75).

"Bes and Christ are equated in a Coptic magical papyrus" (p. 75) — in fact, Bes was still a popular god in Abydos in 500 A.D., almost two centuries after Egypt had become Christian by edict of Constantine. A Coptic amulet has an image of Christ and scenes from the New Testament on one side and an image of Horus on the other, taming crocodiles and scorpions. The apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus conflates the passion of Christ and the life and death of Osiris.

Oh, and there's much, much more in Eric Hornung's books.

Ambivalent Symbolism

Richard Wilkinson notes in *Reading Egyptian Art* that "Because fire appears to have a life of its own, it may represent life itself — as when the Egyptian king kindled a new flame in his *sed* (jubilee) festival" — lighting a torch or lamp was a symbolic act in various temple rituals, much like the acolytes do in Christian churches. Candle lighting is central to Jewish Sabbath observances, as well, and of course Hanukkah, the "Festival of Lights" commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

"Fire was also an important element in the Egyptian concept

of the underworld, often in ways strikingly similar to the medieval Christian concept of hell," says Wilkinson. "According to the Coffin Texts and other works, the underworld contained fiery rivers and lakes as well as fire demons ... which threatened the wicked" (p. 161).

However, "because all symbols are essentially ambivalent, fire was also a natural symbol of protection," he adds, noting that the righteous had nothing to fear and could drink from the lake of fire and be refreshed.

The counterintuitive ambivalence of the symbol, at once life-destroying and life-affirming, suggests a psychological and symbolic parallel with the Christian cross, which was an instrument of cruel execution for the Romans but a sign of triumph over death and affirmation of everlasting life for the Christians.

The Essence as Reality

The Egyptians did not worship the idol per se, but the spirit inherent in the statue or image — the *Ka*. All people and gods, and statues of gods, had this spiritual double. The Egyptians didn't make any real distinction between the spiritual and physical worlds: the spiritual was all just as real, no matter that it was invisible. To see the physical manifestation of it, they would say, just look at a statue or a sculpture — the *Ka* inherent in the statue is its real essence; the physical image makes the invisible visible.

Again, consider the Christian cross: put two sticks together and it doesn't mean anything, but put it in a religious context and it becomes a Christian symbol; you don't worship the two sticks, but in the religious setting the two sticks are transformed, infused with spiritual meaning. So you treat the object with reverence. You could tie two sticks together to dig in the garden or fly a kite, but if the two sticks were recognized as a religious cross the symbol would become something beyond its physical self. To many Christians it may be something they never actually thought much about and couldn't exactly explain why this object was so special, but the Egyptians could: the image held a soul, a *Ka*.

Physical Symbols

No doubt much could be said about physical objects that become important and meaningful in a ritual setting, but let's be content with just a couple of examples — vestments and scepters.

On the occasion of the *heb-sed* (jubilee festival) the king wrapped himself cocoon-like in a white, full-length robe kept only for that purpose, and in funerary scenes the *sem* priest is always identifiable by his leopard-skin vestment as he performs the Opening of the Mouth ceremony with his *meskhettyu* wand and *pesesh-kef* knife. These items of clothing have meaning in a ritual setting that they would not otherwise, and they are reserved for those purposes — just as the clergy in many Judeo-Christian sects, and in other faiths, as well, don special clothes for ritual purposes.

Scepters, too, have a long history. The *sekhem* scepter, a long baton that looks rather like a flashlight, was a symbol of power, might, i.e., authority, and therefore was shown in the hand of 21

a noble or an official to indicate his status as he appeared before Osiris in Chapter 125 of *The Book of the Dead* and elsewhere. It was also used in temple rituals, carried by the officiant during an offering ceremony, or in the consecration of an obelisk, for instance.

“In such scenes,” says Richard Wilkinson, “the king waves the *sekhem* with his raised right hand ... Alternatively, the king might hold an incense burner in his left hand while officiating with the *sekhem*, and in either case the scepter was waved four or five times over the items being offered while various recitations were made” (p. 183). The obvious image, of course, is the Roman Catholic or Orthodox processional: the waving of the censer, the sprinkling of holy water, the bishop’s crook.

Theoretically a censer could be used to roast marshmallows, but in the ritual setting, it has profound meaning to adherents of the faith. The ancient Egyptians would understand that very well.

They might see parallel interactions portrayed in the tomb scenes — the Temple of Seti I in Abydos comes especially to mind — in which special gifts and blessings are exchanged between deities and the king, e.g., typically symbols of life (*ankh*), stability (*djed*), dominion (*uas*) and a *heb-sed* blessing from deity to king, and from king to deity, food, drink (*nu jar*), *hes* libation, an incense burner, lotus, fire, bread, a *wesekh* collar, etc.

The Role of Myth

Joyce Tyldesley defines myth as “a traditional story set in the past, with a supernatural element, which is used to explain or justify the otherwise inexplicable” (p. 2). I would go a step further and say that in the mind of the believer it contains a truth. With that addition, doesn’t this describe most of the Bible?

Thoth, the god of wisdom, had taught that “God is ineffable” — too overwhelming to be expressed in words, too sacred to be spoken; i.e., “who passeth all understanding,” in Judeo-Christian terms. Therefore for the Egyptians “god” was a concept that needed to be put within the grasp of human beings by couching ideas in myth — imagining the deities in human forms and animal-like (theriomorphic) representations, “the Word made flesh and dwelt among us,” one might say, as John did (John 1:14).

The mythical story contained and supported a truth; the story itself did not have to be, nor was it intended to be, taken literally, as the dictated word of God. The educated knew that everything was subject to interpretation; others may have taken things more conservatively. But when ideas merged and deities became syncretized Egyptians never tried to apply logic or reality (as we would think of it) to the myths, or attempt to reconcile all the inconsistencies, or concern themselves with what we would call contradictions or conflicts.

There was nothing like the Bible or Quran, and certainly no orthodox dogma, but a large body of mythology and theology remains from many sources: tomb and coffin inscriptions — the Pyramid Texts in the Old Kingdom, the Coffin Texts in the Middle Kingdom, various texts in the New Kingdom including *The Book of the Dead*, primarily, but also the *Book of Caverns*, the *Book of Gates*, the *Amduat* (“That Which is in the World Below”), and various other books all dealing with the individual’s journey through the Underworld (or “Otherworld,” which may suggest a better understanding of the idea).

It may seem odd to us, not to have everything written down in some orthodox compilation of belief and tradition, but to them it would have been limiting; in fact, counter to their way of thinking. Every individual was responsible for his/her own faith and the myths were common knowledge. They adopted all kinds of gods and myths from other parts of Egypt and even from abroad, without rejecting any on dogmatic principles. Deities merged and emerged, sometimes replacing an earlier deity but adding that deity’s attributes and functions, sometimes combining their names, in the process of syncretism.

Egyptian religion kept adding mythology, recasting stories in different ways. A myth could be created after the fact, to support and explain a rite already in practice. Wisdom came from understanding, so any means of understanding was legitimate. The word *rekḥ* means “to learn.” The past tense of *rekḥ* means “to know.” If you learned something, you know it. *How* you learned it doesn’t matter; *that* you know it does.

So all beliefs were accepted and brought into the religion as valid views of things — like different poems on the same theme, different perspectives from different observers. The Egyptians did not recognize any inconsistencies or conflicts in these concepts. Nothing was rejected as invalid or unacceptable — with one noteworthy exception, the Atenist heresy of Akhenaten (pp. 16-17), whose brief flicker is a telling example of the adage that the exception proves the rule.

Religion for the Egyptians was not fixed and static in a rigid, dogmatic creed; it was open to constant reinterpretation and addition. Religion stayed vital by accepting new interpretations, additions, and adaptations. New symbols and myths added new aspects of truth. “If you believe something, there must be a good reason for it, so we accept your belief and make it part of our own” — that was the common attitude, ecumenical and eclectic.

The Plurality of God

The Israelite word for God, Elohim, is plural. That may seem odd, but, without going into a complex discussion of theological development and Hebrew grammar, the simple explanation is that we are to take it to mean “God of Gods.” Coincidentally, the Egyptian Ennead was not only the Heliopolitan pantheon, but a collective designation. Silverman, p. 123: “The Ennead was seen to encompass all the gods.”

Indeed, “the Ennead” [= nine] often appears in the context of an all-encompassing godhood. If the Hebrews got that idea in Egypt, the plural form makes more sense. (Incidentally, the Hebrew language does seem to have picked up the *dual* noun form from Egyptian grammar, a form unknown to Western languages.)

The matter thickens for Western thinkers when we imagine that we have stumbled upon evidence of monotheism in ancient Egypt. “By the end of the Old Kingdom at the latest, the Egyptians had developed their conception of a supreme being who is ‘king’ and ‘lord’ of all that is created ... In Egypt, however, the qualities of this supreme being do not attach to a particular deity, but may be attributed to any deity, even to relatively unimportant local gods” (Hornung, *Conceptions*, p. 235).

That solves the problem we may have, for instance, in sorting out the various Creation stories, trying to determine which was the accepted version; it’s simple: they *all* were. “According 22

to the principles of Western logic it would be an impossible contradiction for the divine to appear to the believer as one and almost absolute, and then again as a bewildering multiplicity; we find it surprising that in Egyptian thought these two fundamentally different formulations are evidently not mutually exclusive but complementary” (Hornung, *Conceptions*, p. 237).

Once again we must reckon with the fact that we are not ancient Egyptians and are not equipped with an ancient Egyptian mindset. It does appear, however, that they drew their circle around the definition of the divine very broadly.

Signs and Miracles

“**K**ings speak of being divinely inspired by the gods and could feel their presence in *biayet* (‘signs from god’ or ‘miracles’),” notes Garry Shaw (p. 100).

Kings relied on oracles to advise them before appointing priests or embarking on military campaigns or making major decisions. They also relied on dreams, in which a miracle or vision would reveal the proper course of action.

Thutmose IV employed both. It was revealed to him in a dream that if he cleared the sand away from the Sphinx, the Sphinx would reward him with the kingship — bypassing all of his elder brothers — and lo, that’s exactly what happened. (We are not supposed to suspect any mischief, of course, because the dream pointed the way.) Then as king, he consulted an oracle to be sure a campaign into Nubia would be sanctioned; needless to say, the oracle confirmed that it was.

We should not be too surprised at all the dream-visions and revelations that turn up in the Bible. They were apparently reliable conduits of divine counsel in the minds of men at the time.

Funerary Rites and Customs

Ra, the sun — the life-giving light — ended the darkness and reaffirmed life every morning at its rebirth in the East. It set in the West, so the land of the dead was The West (Eg. *Amentet*). They buried the dead at the west end of the burial chamber, to face the rising sun at their reawakening.

We too put the headstone at the west end of the grave, culturally for the same reason: so the dead can face the sun at dawn when they rise from the grave; it’s a mythology we share.

The first aspect of the sun that the risen Egyptian would see would be either the first light, *akhet*, “The Place of Becoming Effective,” a.k.a. “horizon,” or the sun disk itself, *khepri*, “He Who Becomes,” both of which present a way of looking at it in a typically Egyptian manner of thinking.

The Flight to Heaven

The ascension of Elijah, who “went up to Heaven in a whirlwind” (2 Kings 2:11), the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:9, Luke 24:50), and the Assumption of Mary into Heaven (apocryphal but declared as Roman Catholic dogma by Pope Pius XII in 1950, and shared by the Orthodox church) have their counterparts in the ascension of the 5th Dynasty king Unas

(2375-2345). On the north wall of his antechamber, Utterance 302 says “Wepwawet [the Opener of the Ways] has let Unas fly to heaven amongst his brothers, the gods. He flies up, O men! Unas flies up away from you!” And on the west wall, Utterance 258: “Unas goes to heaven with the wind, with the wind! He will not be hindered, there is no one who might hinder him.”

Pyramid Texts Utterance 213: “O Unas, you have not gone away dead, you have gone away alive to sit on the throne of Osiris!” This is the promise awaiting the blessed dead, expressed on the south wall of the burial chamber.

“How pleasant is your condition! You become a spirit, O Unas, among your brothers the gods. How changed, how changed is your state!” (Utterance 224).

Now, with the support of Utterance 305 on the north wall of the antechamber — “The spirit belongs to heaven, the body to earth” — the Egyptian theology has accounted for the apparent but mistaken impression that the deceased is (in King James terms) “corruptible.” However the mortal remains may seem, the soul “has gone away alive,” and is eternal.

Also on the north wall of the antechamber, Utterance 312: “Should Unas be opposed, Atum will be opposed. Should Unas be beaten, Atum will be beaten. Should Unas be hindered on his way, Atum will be hindered.” In other words, what you do unto others, you do unto me — in this case, the god is Atum, the creator deity in Heliopolitan theology; in the Christians’ New Testament, it is Jesus.

Curse Be the Tie that Binds

An Egyptian tomb was protected by a curse that warned anyone who desecrated it, or who failed to honor the tomb owner’s plea for prayers to sustain his *Ka*, that spiritual horrors would be visited upon them.

The Book of Revelation, which concludes the Christian Bible, ends with a warning that if anyone “adds to [these words], God will add to that person the plagues described in this book.” Likewise anyone who “takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy” will be subject to the curse of God.

Words Cast in Stone

When you read the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts and then the New Kingdom *Book of the Dead*, it is clear that the monotonous repetitions and formalities that characterize the PT have become ritualized: a canon has been established; after the Pyramid Texts, the style is emulated in other funerary texts — it is simply “the way it is done.”

Likewise the ritual passage through the seven Gates of Night, in which the deceased must stop at each gate and state — precisely and without hesitation — the names of the gatekeeper, the guard, and the announcer; at the first gate, for example, “He Whose Face is Inverted, Multitudinous of Forms,” “Eavesdropper,” and “The Hostile-Voiced.” The deceased is equipped to do this: Spell 144 of *The Book of the Dead (The Book of Going Forth by Day)* has provided the necessary knowledge. But everything must be said with liturgical perfection.

We may thank the ancient Egyptians for passing that habit of mind on to the Coptic Christians, whose adherence to precise 23

liturgical pronunciation gives us the only real clues we have to the sound of the ancient Egyptian language, the final form of which was Coptic.

Thanks to the Coptic Christians

“The effect of Egyptian civilization on Israel is obvious,” Noblecourt concluded (p. 258). So why was so little known about all these borrowings, connections, influences, understandings and similarities for so many centuries — through the time that *all* the Christian and Muslim texts were being developed, and most if not all of the Jewish texts?

Because while people did know how to read Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and Latin, no one knew how to read hieroglyphs. We could read the reflection but not the original, until linguistic scholars finally unlocked the Egyptian language 200 years ago.

Credit is due the Coptic Christian Church for its help in preserving the Egyptian language. Hieroglyphs go back to at least 3250 B.C. and cursive forms from about 2700 B.C., which much later evolved into Demotic — “writing for documents” — but all of these were some form of hieroglyphic writing. The last linguistic development was Old Coptic, which was used to write liturgy in which exact pronunciation was critical. Because of that, Coptic is the best source we have to know what the Egyptian language sounded like.

The Egyptian Christians (Copts) used Coptic as a liturgical language (like Latin in the Roman Catholic church before Vatican II, Greek in the Greek Orthodox church today, Arabic in the mosque and Hebrew in the synagogue) from then on. In doing so, they preserved the language of ancient Egypt — but they did so through Greek. Coptic was written using the Greek alphabet, plus six additional characters for sounds that didn’t exist in Greek.

St. Mark is said to have visited Alexandria, around 50-64 A.D., to preach, and thus brought the Christian faith to Egypt — the Coptic Christian Church regards him as its first patriarch and founder of the See of Alexandria.

The Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 A.D. and in 395 Christianity was declared the religion of the Roman Empire, including Egypt. Egypt remained so until the Muslim conquest in 641 A.D., at which time Islam was installed.

Hagar, Sarai, Abram and Ishmael

An Egyptian handmaiden, a slave girl named Hagar, was given to Abram by his wife Sarai, to be a wife to him so an heir could be produced, since Sarai up to that point was barren (Genesis 16: 1-3) — this was just before both of them got their names changed to Abraham and Sarah.

Hagar’s chief claim to fame was that she was the mother of Ishmael, who was to become the patriarch of Islam, and is recognized by Jews and Christians alike as the first-born son of Abram.

But there is another Egyptian element in the story besides the origin of Hagar. Sarai claimed Hagar had treated her with contempt after Ishmael was born, and Abram told her to deal with it herself — she could do what she wished and he would stay out of it. That may sound spineless of him, but it’s actually pretty Egyptian: the wife had considerable power and authority in the

household, including responsibility for marketing, financial matters and personnel management.

An Egyptian man had only one wife, whereas Abram had two. Apparently Sarai did not reckon with the fact that involving Hagar was actually her idea. But Abram did not remind her of that, as one might expect him to do anywhere else — anywhere but in an Egyptian home, that is.

Miscellany

“Yahweh promised to make Jeremiah (15:20) ‘a fortified wall of bronze.’ The earlier, Egyptian expression for an insurmountable rampart was “the bronze wall” (Noblecourt, p. 173). Why not iron? The Egyptians had no iron, to speak of. Their only source of iron, prior to the Greco-Roman Period, was from outer space: meteorites.

“The monastic movement is strictly of Egyptian origin. Its heritage represents the greatest contribution that Coptic Egypt made to Christianity” (Noblecourt, p. 276). Monasticism could have roots in ancient Egypt: some of the temple priests were full-timers, others served three- or four-month terms in the temple, and the God’s Wife of Amun and her court were very much monastic, when the office was revived after the New Kingdom.

Will Durant observed in *The Story of Civilization* that the “parallelism of members,” or repetition of the thought in a different phrase” was a poetic device that the “Hebrew poets adopted from the Egyptians ... and immortalized in the Psalms” (Part 1, p. 176).

Solomon, who followed David, instituted the *missim*. “Citizens owed a month of required work to the government each year” (Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* p. 45). The Egyptians also had a practice of employing corvée labor to build pyramids — not slave labor per se, but not entirely volunteer either, more like a tax paid in labor. But that was around 1,600 years earlier.

The tall, slim *hes* vase, used in ancient Egypt for libations, signifying life, well-being and divine offering, also appears in churches and synagogues in much the same form, holding flowers, which should come as no surprise — it’s a vase, after all. But the Egyptian word *hes* means “to praise,” and also signifies “favor.” This may be a case of inheriting a thing but not its meaning, and yet somehow still devoting it to its original, meaningful status.

birth, and regeneration,” according to Richard Wilkinson. The tadpole, which was the glyph for 100,000, stood for “abundance,” and we see it at the bottom of the *renpet* palm branch, indicating “abundant regeneration,” i.e., eternal, cyclical resurrection. “In the later dynasties of the New Kingdom the frog hieroglyph was used to write the ritual expression *wekhem ankh*: ‘repeating life,’ and because it was connotative of rebirth, the frog, like the fish, was later adopted by the Christianized Egyptians as a symbol of the resurrection” (R. Wilkinson, p. 107).

How did it happen?

“How did it happen?” presumes that it did happen, and some may think that’s too much to presume. To what extent did Egyptian religion and mythology actually influence the Hebrews we can only speculate, but, as we have seen, the textual evidence is compelling. Let’s look at what we know and see what we can extract from that.

Ezra put together the combination of Hebrew texts that we know as the Torah (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament) about 458 B.C., using four sources known to biblical scholars as **E**(lohim), **J**(ehovah), **P**(riestly) and **D**(euteronomic). A more detailed treatment of that is coming in the next section.

The eminent biblical scholar Richard E. Friedman notes in *The Ancient Near East Today* (September 2017) and in *The Exodus* that among the Asiatic people who had been in Egypt for centuries, “coming and going all along,” were the Levites, a group in Israel with Egyptian names. These are the people, he says, “who foster circumcision, a known practice in Egypt, the ones with connections to Egyptian material culture: a Tabernacle that has parallels with the battle tent of Ramesses II, an ark that has parallels with Egyptian barks.”

Their stories are the ones that contain “known items of Egyptian lore: the hidden divine name, turning an inanimate object into a reptile, the conversion of water to blood, a spell of three days of darkness, death of the firstborn, parting of waters, death by drowning, and stories of quotas for brickmaking and the use of straw in mudbrick — also Egyptian practices,” says Friedman. These Levite sources of the Hebrew Bible — the **E**, **D** and **P** documents — also contain the stories of the plagues and the Exodus, and laws concerning the treatment of slaves and foreigners.

“But this never occurs in the non-Levite **J** source, or anywhere else in ancient Near Eastern law,” Friedman points out. Again, all this from the **E**, **D** and **P** documents came out of Egypt. (Friedman’s books *Who Wrote the Bible?* and *The Exodus* are must reading for anyone with serious interest in the matter.)

The mythology upon which Egyptian religion was based had been around for 2,000-2,500 years by Ezra’s time, the fifth century B.C., some of it even longer. The Hebrews spent at least 400 years, perhaps 430 by their reckoning, in Egypt, so they certainly had plenty of time to be exposed to Egyptian thought. (As we shall see shortly, the exposure of Asiatic people to Egyptian stories and ideas, in fact, goes back much earlier than that.)

The Torah would have come along, in its assembled form, about 800 years after the Exodus, assuming the pharaoh at the time was Ramesses II.

Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman probe deeply into the question of when the Bible’s parts were compiled into the Torah

as we know it — an admirable effort of scholarship that I will not attempt to match here. But an example may suffice in luring the reader to their extensive work, *The Bible Unearthed*. Camels, for instance, are mentioned a lot in the Bible, and early on; in Genesis 37, for example, camel caravans are mentioned in connection with Joseph’s sale by his brothers into slavery (p. 37). The problem is, conventional wisdom is that camels were not used as beasts of burden until after 1000 B.C. — although recently that has been challenged. (See Mark W. Chavalas, www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/44/6/11.)

Not to belabor the matter further, “All the clues point to a time of composition many centuries after the time in which the Bible reports the lives of the patriarchs took place,” Finkelstein and Silberman conclude. “These and other anachronisms suggest an intensive period of writing the patriarchal narratives in the eighth and seventh centuries” (p. 38). Other evidence then points to the final compilation of those sources in the mid-fifth century.

It must be noted that by no means do scholars agree on the timing or the circumstances of “the Exodus,” or even whether there was “an exodus.” Some prefer to call it “exodi,” multiple smaller emigrations versus one grand Cecil B. DeMille-style epic event. Some reject the very idea of the Exodus, but that seems most unlikely when we look at all the Egyptian stories and ideas that show up in the Bible; even if they were only repeating an oral tradition handed down for several generations, the volume of the material and its detail and depth argue for veracity.

Friedman dismisses those who are skeptical of the Exodus as a historical event because, as they say, there are no references to it in Egyptian sources. That challenge relies on the assumption that there was one big Exodus “of a mass of Israelites,” not a less dramatic event or, more likely, several exodi over time.

“A group of Levites, of unknown size, leaving at an unknown time, under unknown circumstances, didn’t require a headline in the Egyptian Daily News,” says Friedman (*The Exodus*, p. 67).

The citations in the Five Books of Moses shared by all the People of the Book — Jews, Christians and Muslims — provide compelling evidence of the influence of Egypt on these religious traditions, most of all in the Hebrew Bible, at least recognizably at several points in the Christian New Testament, and in Islam to the extent that it shares history with the other faiths of the Levant, and therefore the received expressions of thought, and stories familiar to all.

When Was the Bible Written?

My interest is Egyptology, but as one of the People of the Book myself, the connection of ancient Egypt to the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is inevitably intriguing. I am not a biblical scholar by any means, but Richard Friedman is, and an eminent one. And so I am drawn indebtedly to his landmark books *Who Wrote the Bible?* and *The Exodus* for an understanding of those connections.

Among the things in the Bible that impede understanding are the apparently contradictory versions of a story. Friedman notes that the doublet, the same story told twice, occurs frequently in the Bible — two Creation stories, two versions of the Noah’s ark story, two ways of referring to God, and many, many others — and this has caused confusion: what is the “correct” version? **25**

Not only that, it turns out that there are actually four story-
strands, four sources, that eventually were skillfully woven to-
gether into a final form of the Torah. That two, or even four,
versions could both be valid seems crazy, unacceptable to the ra-
tional mind (read “Western” mind). Were there two animals of
each kind, or seven? The Bible has it both ways.

In fact, it all sounds very Egyptian. Egypt’s three major cen-
ters of theology — Heliopolis, Memphis and Hermopolis (before
the ascendancy of Amun in the New Kingdom) — each had their
own version of Creation, their own creator god, their own myth-
ology, and yet conflict was minimal and contradiction went un-
recognized. Stories were accepted, ideas traded, combined and
assimilated, deities synthesized, mythologies adopted. Granted,
there was some competition between the schools from time to
time, but like as not it was politically driven. (See my *Thutmose
IV: Placeholder or Pivot?* in Academia.edu, and *Nile* magazine.)

Friedman’s *Who Wrote the Bible?* is massive, and needs to be
read closely and completely. But in brief, it looks at the four
source documents of the Bible and, through meticulous analysis,
determines when and by whom they were assembled and
redacted into the final version that has come down to us as the
Torah, a.k.a. the Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses —
which is erroneous because it’s clear that Moses didn’t write any
of them. “There is hardly a biblical scholar in the world ... who
would claim that the Five Books of Moses were written by
Moses” (Friedman, p. 28).

I am covering this as briefly as possible, at the risk of doing
injustice to Friedman’s meticulous scholarship, but proceeding
anyway because this background is crucial to our perspective of
the gap in time between ancient Egyptian texts, whether influen-
tial or coincidental, and the reflection of that material in the
Bible. The first of the four biblical sources dates back to 922
B.C. at the earliest, and as we shall see, the final assembly of
texts in a finished Torah comes along in the mid-5th century.
(See *What Do We Make of All This?* p. 29.)

These four source documents are:

■ **E** (Elohim, “God” in the language of the northern kingdom,
Israel), written between 922 and 722 B.C. by the priests of
Shiloh, who were descendents of Moses — i.e., Levites, a
priestly class that came from the Egyptian exile.

■ **J** (Jehovah, from “Yahweh,” as God was called in the
southern kingdom, Judah), written by the priests of Aaron be-
tween 848 and 722.

Indicative of the doublet, mentioned above, in **E** God was El,
Elohim, in **J** God was YHWH (Yahweh, from which we get Je-
hovah by spelling it the German way and then inserting vowels);
in **E** the mountain was Horeb, in **J** it was Sinai; **E** emphasized
the prophets and did not call for sacrifice, whereas **J** demanded
sacrifice and decreed that it be done by priests in the temple —
hence the **J** version of the Noah story had seven animals of each
kind, to provide spares to be sacrificed, whereas **E** could get by
with just two.

Most significantly, the Levites who wrote the **E** texts had the
cachet of Egyptian residency. “Only a small portion of the an-
cient Israelites were actually slaves in Egypt,” cautions Friedman
(p. 82). “Perhaps it was only the Levites” — noting, in passing,
that it was only the Levites who had Egyptian names; for exam-
ple, Moses. It was the Levites in Israel who called their God
“El.” When the Levites from Egypt joined up at last with the Is-

raelites in Israel, they decided that both names referred to the
same God, and the Levites then assumed duty as the priests.

In any case, predictably enough, there was conflict between **E**
and **J** in approach, emphasis and agenda, so a combination of **J**
and **E**, called **JE**, was done sometime shortly after 722, and it fa-
vored Moses. The rival Aaronid (**J**) priests then needed an alter-
native to the **JE** version, so they wrote **P**, which of course
favored Aaron.

■ **P** (Priestly), written by a descendent of Aaron between 715
and 609, emphasized the law and orthodoxy, at length — **P** is
larger than all the other three combined — but most notably it is
focused on divine justice, not on a merciful god, or grace.

■ **D** (Deuteronomy), *probably* written by the scribe Baruch in
622. This version appears only in the book of Deuteronomy; the
other three appear throughout the Torah, in greater or lesser pro-
portions and providing both common and unique contents based
on their shared interests and intentional agenda.

Friedman concludes that the “redactor” who wove these
sources together into the Torah as we know it was Ezra, a scribe
and Aaronid priest who returned to Judah from Babylon in 458
B.C. — eighty years after the first exiles had returned — and
brought it all with him. The redactor combined the ideas of di-
vine justice and mercy in “a balance in which they had never
been before,” says Friedman, “a powerful tension ... a new for-
mula that became a crucial part of Judaism and Christianity”
(*Who Wrote the Bible?* pp. 239-40).

The duality of justice and mercy may have been something
new for Judaism, but it certainly wasn’t new for anyone who had
been exposed to Egyptian culture.

In 587 the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and
took most of the people to Babylon as captives. (Jerusalem was
in Judah, the southern kingdom; the northern kingdom, Israel,
had fallen in 722.) All the rest went as refugees to Egypt. Now,
as Ezra was pulling all this together, they were back.

Along with the existing contribution of the Levite priests,
who had spent all that time in Egypt and had written the oldest
source, **E**, Ezra had plenty of Egyptian content to work with.

We can be reasonably sure that **E** goes back to 922 at the ear-
liest, and that by 458 the Torah had come together in final form.
If the Hebrews’ Egyptian sojourn lasted 400-430 years, and if the
Exodus was around 1250-1220, that gives the writers of just **E**
alone at least 700 years of Egyptian exposure — whether cultural
memory, influence, or tradition, either oral or written — to draw
from, along with additional material handed down by those who
had been in exile there in the sixth century (the refugees who
were not deported to Babylon) — not to mention the five cen-
turies *before* the captivity in Egypt, during which immigrants
from Canaan had been settling in the Delta.

The Hebrews and the Hyksos

If we could be sure when the Hebrews’ sojourn in Egypt actu-
ally began, it could tell us much about the actual circum-
stances of their arrival and their status there. The most
plausible analysis, which is more or less supported biblically,
places their 400-year residency during the time of the Hyksos —
the Second Intermediate Period (1650-1550), which followed the
Middle Kingdom. The Hyksos came from Canaan, or some- 26

where in western Asia, but most directly from Canaan. The Egyptian history says they came from *Retenu*, i.e., Palestine.

The word “Hyksos” is Greek, but it came from the Egyptian term *Hekau Khasut*, “rulers of foreign lands,” a semitic group from western Asia. Wherever they had once started from, they had to go *through* Canaan to get to Egypt. Movement in those days was not an overnight matter, and when large groups of people moved they often took a long time doing it, staying for months or years in a place before moving on.

Also, “During the First Intermediate Period Asiatics, mostly Western Semites, had begun to infiltrate into the Delta, driven by famine and ethnic displacements.... These newcomers sold themselves into slavery ... [and many] assumed positions of importance and trust” (Aldred, p. 139) — just as the Bible says Joseph did, and four centuries later, Moses.

If the Hebrews came in during this time, as immigrants, indentured servants, traders or even soldiers, they may have started out in good favor with kings who were their own leaders but then found themselves out of favor as the dynasty changed; or they may indeed have been captives (or conscripted soldiers) dragged along from Canaan by the Hyksos, in which case the Hyksos kings may not have borne them any special affection anyway; or they may have followed the Hyksos into Egypt, as camp followers and settlers. But if it was after about 1650, the kings in Egypt were Asian, not Egyptian.

The actual history of the Hebrews is impossible to determine precisely from the Bible because lifetimes are so exaggerated — Jacob 130, Joseph 110, etc. — and dates of paternity are unlikely: the Bible says Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born, Isaac was sixty when Jacob was born, etc. If we accept the tradition that the Hebrews were in Egypt for 400 years or so, and just arbitrarily put the Exodus at about 1250 B.C. during the reign of Ramesses II (1279-1212 B.C.), the Hebrews’ sojourn in Egypt must have begun sometime around 1650 or after.

And then if we assume more plausible lifespans and reasonable ages of fatherhood (twenty-five or even thirty), Abraham may have been born about 1750. There were three more generations (Isaac, Jacob and Joseph) before the Hebrews went to Egypt; say about 100 years. So working out the history from the other end likewise puts the Hebrews in Egypt around 1650 or shortly thereafter — during the Hyksos period.

Also interesting is *why* the Hebrews went into Egypt. The Bible says there was a famine in Canaan and the Hebrews went there to find food, and that Joseph, who at age seventeen had been sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, rose to power there because he correctly predicted seven years of famine and had grain stored up in anticipation of that. (Joseph may have been more observant than clairvoyant: a famine typically lasted seven years.)

The Hyksos takeover was not likely an invasion but a combination of internal uprising and infiltration over time, and there was a period of steep decline in Egypt toward the end of the Middle Kingdom: a string of very weak kings and a breakdown of centralized government between 1670 and 1630. All this created so much trouble and disorder that the Middle Kingdom stumbled to an end. What followed was the Second Intermediate Period, otherwise known as the Hyksos occupation.

“Archeological excavations in the eastern Nile delta have con-

firmed that ... the Hyksos ‘invasion’ was a gradual process of immigration from Canaan to Egypt, rather than a lightning military campaign” (Finkelstein/Silberman, p. 55). In fact, people from Canaan and elsewhere in western Asia had been immigrating into the Delta for centuries — some of them since the collapse of the Old Kingdom 500 years earlier. The Hyksos essentially just organized the Asiatics who were there; applied their superior military organization, leadership and weaponry; and seized the opportunity during the reign of a weak pharaoh. These Asians simply rose up and took over.

Noblecourt thought the Hyksos were Semite traders from Canaan whose presence in Egypt gradually developed along with their business dealings. From very early in Egypt’s history, there was trade with people around the Levant. A tomb dating back to 3150 B.C. contained 200 wine jugs from Canaan, all the good wood for construction and furniture came from Lebanon, lapis lazuli came from present-day Afghanistan, and so on.

So while the idea of trade-driven migration has plausible legs, the spearhead of the Hyksos takeover had to be military capability. Before 1650, the Egyptians did not have chariots or horses to pull them, the compound bow or the *khepesh* scimitar — these state-of-the-art weapons were all introduced by the Hyksos.

Maybe It Was Like This...

So, if we wish to adhere more or less to the Bible’s version, a possible scenario may be this: Joseph went into Egypt as a slave and rose to power and saved Egypt from famine by storing up grain stocks, and when famine hit the region, in came his brothers (or at least some Hebrews, whether they were his brothers or not) looking for food, and the pharaoh welcomed them, as fellow emigres from Canaan. The Bible does say the pharaoh welcomed them — at first. It was only later, when a new pharaoh took over, that they became enslaved. That pharaoh didn’t know Joseph or how valuable he had been, and feared the Hebrews because now there were so many of them, they might rise up and become a problem. So then, as a result of a defensive move by the king, they did become captives in Egypt.

Or maybe the Hyksos welcomed them because they wanted to bolster their numbers with fellow Asians before the Egyptians could regroup. The Hyksos ruled the north, but meanwhile, all this time, from 1650 to 1550, there was an Egyptian dynasty in the south, ruling Upper Egypt from Thebes.

In any event, the Hyksos did not endear themselves to the Egyptians. They were foreigners, after all, and the bitter memory of the loss of order in the First Intermediate Period, even after four centuries, was still an inherited *Zeitgeist* lingering in the collective mind.

Furthermore, they identified Seth with their own warrior god Sutekh and built a temple for him in Avaris, their capital city in the Delta. To put the assassin of Osiris and the principle of wickedness and disorder on a pedestal was appalling to the Egyptians (of that time, that is; in the 19th Dynasty, three centuries later, Seth would be regarded more favorably).

And finally, the last Hyksos king — who outrageously named himself Apepi, after the snake who tried to kill Ra each night and therefore was an abomination to the Egyptians — infuriated **27**

the Thebans by taunting them with a demeaning, wise-guy complaint that the hippos down south were too noisy and were keeping him awake. That was childish, yes, but apparently it was the last straw. Let's remember that the Thebans had had most of a century to learn how to beat the Hyksos at their own game by improving on the very weapons they had introduced. History is not without its ironies.

The expulsion of the Hyksos in the North and new leadership arising from the Thebans in the South opened the way for a new dynasty and the New Kingdom (Dynasties 18-20). Assuming as I have that the Hebrews came into Egypt with the Hyksos, and accepting the biblical reckoning of about 400 years in Egypt, most of the Hebrews' sojourn — about 300 years of it — was during the New Kingdom.

The Hebrews' Sojourn in Egypt; Moses and the Exodus

Most, but certainly not all, scholars who deal with the Exodus believe it was in the time of Ramesses II, or if not, then during the reign of his son Merenptah, who was the first, in fact the only pharaoh who ever mentioned "Israel" — although he was referring to a people, not a place.

Finkelstein/Silberman and many others date it to the late 13th century (p. 57) — that is, assuming that there was, in fact, an Exodus. Most say yes, but, as mentioned earlier, it may not have been one event but rather several "exodi" over a more extended period than the biblical tradition would have it. In any case, it was a lot bigger deal to the Hebrews than it was to the Egyptians, who never mentioned anything about it, anywhere.

That was not simply due to Egyptian pride. "The escape of more than a tiny group from Egyptian control at the time of Ramesses II seems highly unlikely" because in the 13th century "Egypt was at the peak of its authority" and had a firm grip on Canaan and the entire region (Finkelstein/Silberman, p. 60). The grip was especially firm along the Ways of Horus, the route north of Sinai connecting the Delta to Gaza, protected by forts and garrisons. "One can hardly accept the idea of a flight of a large group of slaves from Egypt through the heavily guarded border fortifications ... in a time of such a formidable Egyptian presence," conclude Finkelstein and Silberman (p. 61).

I remain in the camp favoring the time of Ramesses II, partly because the Bible does make reference to the city the Hebrews were building in the eastern Delta, Pi-Ramesses, which was ordered by Ramesses II. So, rather arbitrarily, I admit, I tend to place the Exodus/exodi a little earlier, around the middle of the 13th century. That gives the Israelites (née Hebrews) a little more time to get settled and "emerge only gradually as a distinct group in Canaan," as Finkelstein and Silberman say, "at the end of the 13th century."

Egypt was the world's most formidable military power at the time, and Ramesses II was a capable commander-in-chief. Egypt controlled territory far into Asia. The Hebrews could hardly have been equal to the task of direct confrontation. The cast of thousands imagined in DeMille's biblical epic is fantasy. Also, no doubt a lot of them stayed in Egypt — after all, they had been there for 400 years, so to many it was home.

Why didn't Ramesses chase them down and bring them back? The Bible says the Egyptian army got bogged down, yes, but that

was the end of it. If the Hebrews really represented a significant work force, the loss of which would have serious economic impact, certainly the Egyptians would have been serious about keeping them contained and on the job. But no, they let the Hebrews go.

It seems clear enough that the Exodus was a non-event from the Egyptian point of view. The Hebrews were small potatoes and the pharaoh had his hands full with the Hittites — an actual superpower to contend with — and besides, where could they go? At the time of the Exodus, Egypt also ruled the Sinai and controlled the territory beyond, including Palestine, with garrisons and pledges of allegiance from regional rulers. The Hebrews were simply escaping to another part of Egyptian-controlled territory; to actually get beyond pharaoh's clutches they would have to go all the way to Persia.

The pharaoh question is complicated by the "historical vagueness of the Exodus story," as Finkelstein and Silberman put it (p. 65): the Bible never mentions the Exodus pharaoh by name. But the historicity of the seventh century is much clearer: the "most consistent geographical details of the Exodus story come from the seventh century ... six centuries after the events of the Exodus were supposed to have taken place." Finkelstein and Silberman conclude that the Exodus narrative was put in final form in the late seventh-early sixth centuries and reflects the reality of *that* time, not the time of the New Kingdom. The inventory of evidence makes it difficult to conclude otherwise.

Christiane Noblecourt, in her impressive study *Gifts from the Pharaohs: How Egyptian Civilization Shaped the Modern World*, also provided considerable and specific evidence that the writers of the Bible were outside Egypt when they wrote, operating only on memory that had been handed down to them. "One detail in particular is worth dwelling on here," she wrote: "the easterly wind that scorches the corn in the biblical account [Genesis 41]. In Egypt, it was the southern wind ... that caused this effect. Clearly, there is confusion here" (p. 187). (Palestine does have a destructive wind such as that described, but it's easterly.)

Suffice it to say, Noblecourt's inventory of evidence is compelling.

Ultimately their own evidence leads Finkelstein and Silberman to the position that "There was no mass Exodus from Egypt. There was no violent conquest of Canaan. Most of the people who formed early Israel were local people ... originally Canaanites" (p. 118).

Not surprisingly, not everyone accepts the Finkelstein/Silberman reckoning of history, but aside from a blind acceptance of the Bible story, enshrined as it is in tradition, a Cecil B. DeMille-style epic is unsupportable. That doesn't make the Exodus fiction; it simply scales it to reality, adjusts the clock to the times in which it was written down, and above all, recognizes its purpose as the defining event in the cultural identity of Judaism.

It must be noted that there is an alternative view that allows for a "collective memory" of the "Egyptian sojourn." As Manfred Bietak explains in his article, "On the Historicity of the Exodus" (*Biblical Archeological Review*), scholars such as Nadav Na'aman and Donald Redford have seen a problem with the idea of a "collective memory" when the people were not clustered in a single location but dispersed in multiple locations in Egypt over a long span of time, and therefore their shared memory as a society had to be fragmented. So how could they all

“remember” the same story of oppression under Egyptian taskmasters?

This view posits that in addition to the Proto-Israelites in Egypt, there was group also in Canaan, under Egyptian occupation, and when the two societies of Proto-Israelites came together, after the Exodus, the experience of the group in Canaan became the shared story for all. Also, Bietak says, “The narrative was remodeled according to the realities of the late eighth and seventh centuries in Canaan, integrating the experience with the Assyrian oppression and deportations.” (Toby Wilkinson also suspects that the story of the Hebrew experience may have been “a conflation of several unrelated historical events,” p. 313.)

This parallel view of things cited by Bietak allows for both an Exodus from Egypt and a collective memory of oppression, thus disarming the problems associated with each. Bietak’s article makes clear that there was an Exodus (of some kind) from the Delta eastbound, north of Sinai, and that it could not have been later than the Ramesside period, as some have theorized, because of some key place-names mentioned in the Bible, e.g., the cities of Pithom (Eg. *Pi-Atum*) and Ramses (Eg. *Pi-Ramesse*) and the Yam Suph (Reed Sea, Eg. *Pa-Tjuf*), the course of the Nile at the time, and other evidence of things that existed only during the Ramesside period. The Exodus/exodi had to have been in the 13th century, i.e., during the reign of Ramesses II or Merenptah.

So, is the Exodus story history, truth, myth, folktale, allegory? Or all of the above? Clearly, it is not fantasy.

What Do We Make of All This?

Most faiths — including certainly Judaism, Christianity and Islam — attempt, in their own ways, to address four key blocks in the foundation of religion:

1. **Origin.** Where did we come from, how did we get here? How did it all begin? Did it just happen?
2. **Relationship.** Are we alone? Or is there a God who created all this, and moreover, a God who cares about us? What is our relationship to this God?
3. **Meaning.** Why are we here? What does life mean to us? What should we be doing while we’re here?
4. **Destiny.** What’s next? Is this it, or is there something beyond this for us? Where are we going after this life, and how do we get there?

Religion presents answers for these questions, but sects vary, especially on the question about how to get there. Some say good works, which sounds very Egyptian at first blush; others say it’s grace, which does not.

The Egyptians, in fact, did not find themselves on the horns of that dilemma. Each candidate for eternal life was called to speak “true of voice” at the Judgment, attesting to his or her ethical and moral behavior during life — i.e., good works — but nobody failed the test, thanks in part to the right spells, incantations and amulets employed, but also in no small degree to Anubis, who fiddled with the scales to make sure the supplicant passed — therefore, a form of grace. Nobody would spend six months’ wages on a scroll that concluded with his eternal damnation.

The evidence of influence from Egypt leads inevitably to a troubling issue for many: the origins, and therefore perhaps even

the validity of the Hebrews’ religion, and then, by extension, the faiths that followed it, Christianity and Islam — all three cherished as systems of belief by their adherents, and for many, as expressions of literal truth.

Even for the more liberal, the question remains: If the Hebrews got their beliefs and practices from their experience in Egypt, how do we regard these borrowings when they appear in the Judeo-Christian texts? Do we just write off those later traditions as plagiarism? Is Judaism basically a co-opted stepchild of Egyptian religion? Of course not.

But then, should we *not* delve into Egyptian religion for fear that in some ways it may be linked to our own? Should we simply whistle our way past the dark alleys of history? Scholarly curiosity says no.

Certainly, it must be noted that the history of world religion is full of archetypes — universal themes commonly found in diverse societies. People in various times and places have come up with similar ideas. But archetypes are not necessarily influences, simply commonalities, independently conceived. Ritual washing, for instance, was practiced in ancient Egypt and is practiced now in Christianity, as the sacrament of baptism, and also figures importantly in many other cultures that have no relationship or connection to each other. It’s an archetype, not an influence.

In the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom (Spells 273 and 274) the so-called Cannibal Hymn suggests that the dead king “eat the gods to absorb their power” (Tyldesley, p. 12). We may recall also that Osiris was “the Giver of Himself,” “the Food That Will Never Perish.” Of course, it sounds like the Christian Eucharist, “the body and blood of Christ,” but it’s an archetype; the “eating of the god” is a common element in a number of mythologies with absolutely no connection to each other.

There should be nothing too troubling here. There are many such universal patterns of thought throughout the history of human culture. The obligation for us is simply to recognize that an idea may not be exclusive and be alert for particulars that differentiate a plausible finding from archetype.

What’s different about the Egyptian corpus is that much of it actually does appear to have influenced the formation of Judeo-Christian thought and expression, and also whatever Islam has inherited from the original Hebrew sources. There are direct similarities that are too close and too specific to be coincidental. If the Hebrews did spend 400 (or 430) years in Egypt — not even counting the centuries of immigration from Asia and residence there before that — all the while exposed to Egyptian religion and mythology, and then, over the eight centuries (or more) that followed, jotted down their thoughts and, at last, incorporated them into the Torah, we have a compelling case for influence.

That’s the shorter view. If we stretch the time from the earliest immigration from Canaan into the Delta, through the captivity, to the final assembly of the Torah, we are looking at perhaps as long as 1,700 years during which Hebrews could have been exposed to Egyptian thought and mythology, contemplated it all themselves, chose those things that were valuable to their own way of thinking, and contributed those things to the content of what would become the Torah that Ezra compiled sometime before or during 458 B.C. That would be a long time not to have picked up something that made sense and seemed worth keeping.

The Hebrews wished to understand their relationship with God, and in that context make sense of the world and deal

with the meaning of life and the fact of death, and it appears that they found some concepts and practices in Egypt that seemed useful in bringing their ideas into focus. The Egyptians had been at it a long time, so perhaps there was no point in reinventing the wheel.

Of course, their thought was selective and it was filtered by centuries of re-thinking before it became biblical, and when it did, it did not resemble Egyptian religion enough to be considered a stepchild or offshoot of Egyptian religion.

The *big* difference in Judaism, and also therefore in Christianity and Islam, was monotheism and the exclusion of all other deities, which totally flopped in Egypt on the one occasion it was tried — the Atenist heresy of Akhenaten in 18th Dynasty.

For those who are seriously discomforted, some solace may lie in acceptance of the similarities (and apparent influences) as evidence of one supreme being who has revealed himself (or herself?) to various peoples in sometimes remarkably similar ways. The ancient Egyptians would almost certainly agree with that.

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